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The Victim

Translated from the Italian of

Gabriele D'Annunzio

By Georgina Harding

London

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1899

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CAN I go before a judge and say: 'I have committed a murder; the poor little thing would not have died if I had not killed it—I, Tullio Hermil, with my own hands. I planned the crime in my own house, and carried it out in the full consciousness of what I was doing, with calm precision and absolute immunity. And afterwards, I continued to live on in my home with that secret in my heart, for a whole year—up till the present day. To-day is the anniversary of the deed. I am here in your hands. Listen to me and judge me——' I say, can I do this?

I cannot, and I will not. Human justice cannot touch me. No tribunal on earth could pronounce judgment upon me.

And yet the desire is strong in me to accuse myself—to confess. I must unburthen myself to some one.

To whom?

21X-30

CHAPTER I

To begin, then.

It was April. We had come to the country a few days before—Giuliana and I and our two children, Maria and Natalia—to spend Easter with my mother in her large old country-house called La Badiola. We had been married seven years.

Three years had passed since another Easter which had seemed to me truly a festival of pardon, peace, and love in that same house, white and solitary as a monastery, steeped in the scent of lilacs; when Natalia, our second little girl, was adventuring her first steps and beginning to emerge from the swathing bands of babyhood like a flower from the sheath, and Giuliana was full of kind indulgence towards me, though not without a touch of chastened sadness in her smile. For I had just come back to her, penitent and submissive, after my first grave infidelity. Innocent of the state of affairs, my mother, with her own dear hands, had fastened a branch of olive above our bed and replenished the little silver holy-water vessel that hung upon the wall.

But in the three years between then and now, how much had happened! Between me and Giuliana the rupture had become final, irremediable. My transgressions had heaped themselves up. I had sinned against her in a thousand cruel ways, without remorse,

without reserve, driven along by my thirst for pleasure, by the rapid impulse of my passions, by the licentious curiosity of my corrupt mind. I had been the lover of two of her intimate friends. I had openly spent several weeks at Florence with Teresa Raffo and had a duel with the sham Count Raffo, in which my disreputable adversary had covered himself with ridicule through certain unseemly occurrences. And none of these things had been unknown to Giuliana, but she had suffered proudly and almost in silence.

There had been but few conversations between us on the subject, and those of the briefest. I had never lied to her, thinking that by perfect candour I lessened the magnitude of my transgressions in the eyes of this gentle and noble woman whom I knew to be liberal-minded.

I was also aware that she recognised the superiority of my intellect, and that she partly excused my excesses by the specious theories I had frequently propounded to her on the subject of the moral doctrines ostensibly professed by the majority of mankind. The certainty of not being judged by her as an ordinary individual lightened the burden on my conscience. 'So she too understands,' thought I to myself, 'that, being different from the common herd and having a different conception of life, I am exempt from the laws that others would impose upon me, and can afford to live in the absolute sincerity of my exceptional nature, regardless of the opinion of the multitude.'

For I was convinced of being not only a choice but an exceptionally rare spirit, and imagined that the rare quality of my sentiments and sensations lent

an added nobility and distinction to my every action. Proud of and interested in this acuteness of sensibility, I was utterly unable to grasp the necessity of any self-control, any more than I ever thought of denying myself one expression, one manifestation of my desires. But at the bottom of all my subtleties lay nothing but stupendous egotism, seeing that while I withdrew from all its obligations I accepted all the benefits of my condition.

In point of fact, piece by piece I had managed to regain my original liberty, and that with Giuliana's consent and without any recourse to hypocrisy or degrading subterfuges and lies. I made it as much my aim and object to be open with her as others do to dissemble. I sought on all occasions to confirm between me and Giuliana the new compact of fraternity, of pure friendship. She was to be my sister, my best friend.

My only sister, Costanza, had died at the age of nine, leaving a void in my heart that had never been filled. I often thought with poignant regret of the dear child who had never been able to offer me the tender treasure of her love, a treasure which I imagined inexhaustible. Of all human affections, of all the various kinds of love in this world, that of a sister has always appeared to me the highest and most consoling. And I thought of this lost source of consolation with a sorrow which the irrevocability of death rendered almost mystical. Where, indeed, should I find another sister?

Spontaneously this affectionate aspiration turned towards Giuliana.

Disdaining to share me with others, she had abandoned the slightest approach to a caress, and I,

for a long time now, had not felt my senses stir by a hair's-breadth when at her side; her breath upon my cheek, the sight of the two little beauty-spots she had on her neck, left me perfectly cold. It did not seem possible that she could be the same woman I had seen grow pale and faint under the burning ardour of my kisses.

I therefore offered her my brotherly love, and she accepted it quietly. If she was grieved, I was still more so at the thought that we had buried our love for good and all without hope of resurrection, that our lips would perhaps never meet again—never again. And in my crass selfishness I considered that she ought to be grateful to me in her heart for this grief which I felt to be irremediable, and that she should account herself repaid and solaced by it as by a reflection of the love that was lost. Time was, when we had dreamed not only of love but of passion that should last till death—*usque ad mortem.* Yes, we believed in that dream, and how often had we not used those grand and illusory words: For ever! Never! Finally, we believed firmly in the affinity of the flesh, in that mysterious affinity which unites two human beings in the mighty bond of insatiable desire; we believed in it because the keenness of our sensations had in no wise diminished even after the obscure Genius of the species had, by means of us, attained his sole purpose: the creation of a new being.

But that dream had fled, the flame was spent. My spirit—I swear it—had wept sincerely over the ruins. And yet—how rise up against a necessary phenomenon of nature? How avoid the inevitable?

Thus, it was by great good fortune that, love being

dead through the inexorable fatality of natural circumstances and not by any fault of ours, we could still live on together joined by a new sentiment, perhaps no less profound than the old, assuredly loftier and more unusual. We were, indeed, blessed in that a new illusion should succeed the old, and establish between our souls an interchange of unsullied affection, of delicate emotions, and exquisite sadness.

But towards what, in reality, did all this platonic rhetoric tend? Simply to this: that a victim should submit smilingly to the sacrifice.

Plainly, this new life—no longer conjugal but fraternal—was entirely based on one presumption: the absolute self-renunciation of the sister. I regained my full liberty, could go in search of those keen sensations which my nerves demanded, could absorb myself passionately in another woman, live my life outside my home and then go back and find *my sister* awaiting me, find in my rooms a thousand traces of her thoughtful care—roses on my table arranged by her hand, all around me the order, the elegance, the spotless brightness of some favourite abode of one of the Graces. Of a surety, an enviable state of things for me! And where find another such pearl beyond price as the woman who thus consented to sacrifice her youth and beauty for me, content to be repaid merely by a kiss of gratitude, almost of religious devotion, on her pure and gentle brow?

My gratitude became at times so warm, that it displayed itself in a multitude of delicate and affectionate attentions. I knew myself to be the best of brothers. When I was away, I wrote Giuliana long

letters full of tender melancholy which were often posted at the same time as those addressed to my whilom mistress. And my mistress could no more have been jealous of those letters than of my devotion to the memory of my dead sister Costanza.

However, absorbed though I might be in the intensity of my own individual experiences, I could not quite shut out certain questions which rose in my mind from time to time. For Giuliana to be able to continue her unprecedented form of self-sacrifice, she needs must love me with a surpassing love; and loving me so, and yet being nothing more to me than a sister, she must surely carry in her heart a mortal despair. Was not that man a brute who, without one pang of remorse, could sacrifice to other vain and turbid loves a creature so single-hearted, so courageous, so pathetically smiling?

I remember (and the perversion of my mind in those days fairly amazes me now), I remember that among the arguments I brought forward to appease my conscience, this was the favourite: Moral grandeur being the result of violent griefs overcome, it was necessary, if she was to attain to these heroic heights, that she should go through what I have made her suffer.

But there came a day when I could not but notice that she was suffering in body as well as mind; I saw that her natural pallor was more pronounced, and that sometimes a livid shadow crept into it. More than once, I surprised a spasm of suppressed pain on her face; more than once, she was seized, in my presence, with violent tremblings that shook her from head to foot, and made her teeth chatter as in a sudden attack of ague. One evening, from

a distant room, I caught the sound of a piercing cry of pain. I hurried in and found her leaning against a wardrobe, her features convulsed, writhing in agony as if she had taken poison. She stretched out a hand to me, and held on to mine with a vice-like grip.

'Tullio, Tullio, how horrible! Oh, how horrible!'

She looked full at me, her face close to mine, holding my gaze with her dilated eyes, which seemed to me extraordinarily large in the gathering gloom. And in those great eyes I saw her nameless sufferings pass like a wave, and that fixed, intolerable gaze suddenly awakened a wild terror in me.

It was evening; the room was full of shadows, the window wide open and the curtains swelling and fluttering in the breeze, and a candle burned on a table in front of the looking-glass. I do not know why, but the flapping of the curtains, the agitated flickering of the candle reflected in the pale mirror—all assumed a sinister significance in my mind, and added unspeakably to my terror. The thought of poison flashed across me. At the same instant, she cried out again, and beside herself with sudden pain, threw herself distractedly on my breast.

'Oh, Tullio, Tullio! Help me! Help me!'

Frozen with horror, I remained a moment unable to utter a single word or move a muscle.

'What have you done? What have you done, Giuliana? Speak—tell me—what have you done?'

Startled by the profound agitation in my voice, she lifted her head a little and looked at me. My face must have been paler and more convulsed than her own, for in frightened, hurried accents she exclaimed—

'Nothing, nothing, Tullio; don't be alarmed. It is not serious—see—it is only my old pain—you know, one of my old attacks—it soon passes—you must not be frightened.'

But I, overcome by that horrible suspicion, doubted her word. Everything around seemed to point to some tragic occurrence, and a voice within me whispered: 'It was for you—for your sake she wished to die. You—you have driven her to this.' I seized her hands; they were icy cold, and drops of moisture stood upon her brow.

'No, no—you are deceiving me,' I burst out; 'you are deceiving me. For pity's sake, Giuliana—dearest—speak—tell me, what did you—tell me, for pity's sake, what did you—*drink*?'

And my horror-stricken eyes searched about the room, on the tables, the floor, anywhere—for some sign to guide me.

Then she understood. She sank once more upon my breast, and tremulously—her lips against my shoulder (never, never shall I forget the indefinable tone of her voice)—she said:

'No, no, no, Tullio—no.'

Ah, is there anything under the sun that can equal the sudden giddy quickening of our inner life? We two stood there silent in the middle of the room, and a whole world of sentiments and thoughts—vast, inconceivable — rushed through my brain, circling round one fixed point of terrifying lucidity: '*And what if it had been true?*' cried the voice. '*What if it had been true?*'

Giuliana shivered unceasingly upon my breast and still kept her face hidden, and I knew that in spite of all her bodily sufferings she had no thought but

for the *possibility* of the deed I had suspected, and for my unreasoning terror.

A question rose to my lips—'Have you ever had that temptation?' and another—'Would you yield to such a temptation?' I asked her neither one nor the other, but I am sure she heard them. We were both, for the moment, dominated by the thought of that death and the images it called up; we both entered into a certain state of tragic exaltation, heedless of the mistaken idea which had given it birth, lost to all sense of reality. All at once, she began to sob, and her tears drew forth mine, till the drops mingled that were so hot, and yet, alas! could not alter our destinies.

I learned afterwards that for some months she had been suffering from a complicated internal trouble, one of those dreadful and obscure ailments which strike at the root of a woman's being and disturb every functional activity. The doctor, with whom I insisted on having an interview, gave me plainly to understand that for a long time to come any demonstration of affection, however slight, must be avoided between my wife and me, and that for her to have another child might prove fatal to her.

This news, although it was somewhat of a shock to me, relieved my mind on two scores—it showed me that I was not to blame for Giuliana's failing health, and also furnished me with a simple explanation to my mother of the necessary separation in our domestic life. For my mother had just arrived in Rome from the country, where she spent the greater part of the year with my brother Federico.

My mother was tenderly attached to her young

daughter-in-law. In her eyes, Giuliana was in truth the ideal wife—the very companion she had dreamed of for her son. She knew no other woman in the world to be compared with her for beauty, or sweetness, or high-breeding. It would have been inconceivable to her that I should desire any other woman, abandon myself to other arms, lay my head on any other bosom. Having been loved by one man for twenty years with unwavering devotion and unbroken faithfulness—*even unto death*—she was totally ignorant of the weariness, the disgust, the treachery, all the wretchedness and misery that may lie concealed beneath the cloak of matrimony. She was unconscious of the indignities I heaped upon that gentle, uncomplaining head. Deceived by Giuliana's generous dissimulation, she still believed in our mutual happiness. If she had known!——

At that time I was still under the baleful spell of Teresa Raffo, who always brought to my mind Apollonio's words to Menippo—ah, that intoxicating poem!—'*O beau jeune homme, tu caresses un serpent, un serpent te caresse!*'

Circumstances favoured me. The death of a relative obliged Teresa to leave Rome and remain away for some time. By an unwonted assiduity towards my wife, I should be enabled to fill the great void which the absence of the 'Biondissima' left in my days. For the agitation of that evening had not quite died out, and something new and indefinable had sprung up between me and Giuliana since that hour.

Though her physical sufferings increased rapidly, my mother and I managed with great difficulty to persuade her to undergo the operation necessitated

by her condition. The operation would have to be followed by a month or six weeks of absolute rest in bed and a careful convalescence. The poor creature's nerves were already extremely worn and irritable. The long and painful preparatives so exhausted and worried her that more than once she threatened to give it all up and revolt against the torture which violated, humiliated, and disgusted her.

'Tell the truth,' she cried one day with lines of bitterness about her mouth; 'when you think of it, haven't you a horror of me? Ah, how ugly, how vile it all is!' And she made a gesture of repulsion at herself and lapsed into sullen silence.

Another day, she noticed, as I came into her room, that some smell of disinfectant was unpleasant to me. Turning as white as her night-dress, she cried excitedly—

'Go away, Tullio—go away! I implore you—and don't come back till I am well again! If you stay here you will hate me. I am hateful like this—I am disgusting. Don't look at me.' And she burst into tears.

Some hours after this, when she had grown quieter, and I sat silent thinking she was falling asleep, she suddenly murmured, in the peculiar tones of one speaking in a dream—

'*Ah, if I had really done it! It was a good suggestion——*'

'What are you saying, Giuliana?'

She did not answer.

'What are you thinking about, Giuliana?'

She only answered with a movement of the lips that tried to be a smile, but failed.

But I thought I understood, and a wave of remorse, of tenderness and pity, swept over me. I would have given anything for her to be able to read in my soul at that moment, to have understood the full measure of my unrevealable, inarticulate, and now ineffectual emotion. 'Forgive me, forgive me! Tell me what I must do so that you may forgive me, so that you may forget all these cruel things. I will come back to you, I will belong to none but you from this time forth—for ever. I have never really loved any but you; I love but you alone. My soul always turns to you in yearning and regret. This I swear,—away from you, I have never tasted true happiness, never known one moment of complete self-forgetfulness—never, never—I swear it! You alone of all the world are good and kind. You are the noblest-hearted, the sweetest woman I could ever have imagined in my fondest dreams—the One and Only. And to think that I have wronged you, have made you suffer, have made you look on death as a welcome deliverance! Ah, you may forgive me, but I can never forgive myself—you may forget, but I never can. I shall always look upon myself as unworthy; not all the devotion of a lifetime could make amends to you for that. From this time forth, you shall be once more my love, my friend, my sister—once more my guardian and my guide. I will tell you all, will open my whole heart to you. You shall see what stores of tenderness I can bring out for your healing and comfort. Ah, you know it! Remember, remember! You were ill then, too, and you would have none but me to cure you; and I never moved from your bedside, day or night. And you said then—"Giuliana will never forget this of

you—never." There were tears in your eyes, and tremblingly I kissed them away. Dear saint! Recall that day. And when you are better and may get up, we will go down to Villalilla. You will still be rather weak and ailing, but you will soon feel stronger. My spirits will rise as in the old days, and I shall make you smile, I shall make you laugh. You will recover that silvery laugh that always refreshed my heart; you will have all your delicious girlish ways again, and wear your hair in the one long plait I was always so fond of. We are young still. We will reconquer our lost happiness, if only you are willing. We will live—live——'

All this I said to her in my own mind, but the words did not pass my lips; for, though I was profoundly moved, and my eyes were wet, I knew well that the mood was fleeting and that my promises were vain. Besides, I also knew that Giuliana would not be deceived, and that her only answer would have been the pale and distrustful smile that had appeared upon her lips many a time before. 'Yes,' that smile said, 'I know that you are kind and do not like to cause me pain, but you are not master of yourself; you cannot resist the fatal impulses that drive you on. Why try to make me close my eyes to the truth?'

I was silent therefore that day; and although, in the days that followed, I fell more than once into the same state of agitation, of confused proposals and vague dreams, I dared not speak. 'If you return to her, you must give up those things in which you take delight, and the woman who corrupts you. Have you the strength to do this?' I answered my own question—'Who can say?' And from day to

day, I waited for this strength to come to me, waited day after day for something to happen (I knew not what) that should force me to come to a decision—make it inevitable. I allowed myself to dream of our new life, the slow re-blossoming of our rightful love, the strange new savour of certain half-forgotten sensations. 'We would go down to Villalilla, to the house where lay embalmed our sweetest memories—we two by ourselves, having left Maria and Natalia with their grandmother at Badiola. The weather would be mild and warm, and, leaning on my arm, the convalescent would wander slowly through all the well-known paths, where every step we took awakened a memory. I would see a little bright flush flicker now and then over her pale face, and we would turn a little shy towards each other—would, now and then, seem lost in thought, and then avoid meeting one another's eyes. For what reason? And then a day would come when, the suggestions of the place being strong upon me, I would venture to remind her of all our sweetest follies in those first days of wedded life here. Do you remember?—and this?—and this? And, little by little, our emotion would increase, become well-nigh unendurable, till, with a simultaneous impulse, we would fall into each other's arms and our lips would meet in a kiss that made our senses reel and faint. She would faint in very truth, and I would hold her in my arms calling her by every fond name my boundless love could suggest. Presently, she would open her eyes, the mask she had worn so long would fall, and for one instant her very soul would gaze fixedly at me, and she would seem transfigured. After so long! After so long!'——

But ah, how like to die she seemed on that morning when the doctor put her under chloroform, and she, feeling herself slipping away into the unconsciousness of death, tried two or three times to put out her arms to me, to call to me for help. I could not bear it; I left the room.

Two long, mortal hours I waited, sharpening my pain on the grindstone of my imagination, while a desperate sense of pity wrung my very vitals for the unhappy creature, not alone whose flesh the surgeon's knife was rudely penetrating, but the inner sanctuary of her being, the very centre of the most hidden and delicate sentiments a woman possesses.

When I re-entered Giuliana's room, she was still under the influence of the anæsthetic, unconscious, speechless—like one dead. My mother was very pale and agitated, but the operation appeared to have been successful, and the doctors were well pleased. The smell of iodoform filled the air. In a corner of the room, an English nursing Sister was engaged in filling an ice-bag, the surgeon's assistant was rolling up a bandage. Things were gradually returning to their accustomed state of well-ordered neatness.

The patient remained for a long time in a sort of stupor; there seemed but little fever. In the night, however, she was seized with frightful spasms of pain and sickness. Opium was powerless to relieve her. And I, beside myself with horror and anxiety at the sight of her cruel sufferings, expecting her to die every minute, did not know what I was saying or doing. I could only share her agony.

Next day she was better, and, after that, improved steadily day by day. She very slowly regained her strength.

I was unwearying in my attentions. I used a certain ostentation in reminding her, by my various actions, of that former illness of hers; my sentiments, however, were not the same as then—I was still her *brother*. Frequently while reading aloud to her from some favourite book, my thoughts would be occupied with a passage in a letter from my absent mistress. Out of sight was not out of mind. There were also times, however, when I felt a lazy disinclination to answer these letters—in one of those peculiar pauses that come even to the strongest passion—and this I took to be a sign of growing indifference, and said once more to myself—'Who knows?'

One day my mother said to Giuliana, in my presence—

'When you are well enough to get up and be moved, we will all go down together to Badiola—won't we, Tullio?'

Giuliana looked at me.

'Yes, mama,' I answered without a moment's hesitation, without thinking; 'and Giuliana and I will go on to Villalilla.'

Giuliana gave me another quick look; then she smiled—a sudden, indescribable smile that was full of almost childlike credulity, like a sick child who has been promised some great and unexpected treat. Her eyelids drooped, but she continued to smile faintly with half-closed eyes that gazed at something far, far away.

How beautiful she looked! How I adored her at that moment! I felt that nothing in the world could compare with her sweet and simple emotion.

A sense of infinite goodness seemed to emanate

from her and penetrate my whole being, filling my heart to o'erflowing. She was sitting up in bed propped by two or three pillows, and her face, framed in the loosened masses of her chestnut hair, had a look of extreme, almost ethereal delicacy; her hands lay listlessly before her, so white that the blue veins alone distinguished them from the sheet.

Taking one of these hands in mine—my mother had, by this time, left the room—I said softly—

'So we will go back—to Villalilla.'

The convalescent answered—

'Yes.'

We said no more, so that we might prolong our emotion, preserve our illusion. We both understood the intense significance hidden in the few words we had just exchanged under our breath. An instinct warned us not to be more definite, to go no further. Had we said more, we should have found ourselves face to face with realities incompatible with that illusion which was lapping our souls in such sweet dreams.

We spent a whole long afternoon mostly by ourselves, reading at intervals, leaning over the same page, our eyes following the same lines. We had some volumes of poems, and we put into the verses an intensity of meaning which they did not really possess. We made the gentle poet the mouthpiece of our emotions. I underlined with my nail the lines that seemed to interpret the feelings I dared not express.

Je veux, guidé par vous, beaux yeux aux flammes douces,
Par toi conduit, o main où tremblera ma main,
Marcher droit, que ce soit par des sentiers des mousses
Ou que rocs et cailloux encombrent le chemin.

Oui, je veux marcher droit et calme dans la Vie . .

And she, after having read, lay back a little while upon her pillows with closed eyes, an almost imperceptible smile upon her lips.

> Toi la bonté, toi le sourire,
> N'es tu pas le conseil aussi,
> Le bon conseil, loyal et brave . . .

But I saw the lace upon her bosom flutter in response to her breathing, and it began to disturb and affect me like the faint scent of orris-root that rose from the sheets and pillows. I hoped and expected that, overcome by sudden emotion, she would twine an arm about my neck and press her cheek to mine, so that I should feel the corner of her mouth against my face.

She laid a slender forefinger on the page, and, marking the margin with her nail, guided my eyes along the lines :—

> La voix vous fut connue (et chère ?)
> Mais à présent elle est voilée
> Comme une veuve désolée . . .
>
> Elle dit, la voix connue,
> Que la bonté c'est notre vie . . .
>
> Elle parle aussi de la gloire
> D'être simple sans plus attendre,
> Et de noces d'or et du tendre
> Bonheur d'une paix sans victoire.
>
> Accueillez la voix qui persiste
> Dans son naïf épithalame
> Allez, rien n'est meilleur à l'âme
> Que de faire une âme moins triste !

I clasped her wrist, and, slowly bending my head, pressed my lips in the hollow of her hand.

'You—could forget ?' I murmured.

She laid her hand upon my mouth and uttered her great watchword—

'Silence.'

At that moment, my mother came in to announce the visit of Signora Talice. I read Giuliana's annoyance in her face, and I too felt full of irritation against the inopportune visitor.

'Oh, *mio Dio*!' sighed Giuliana.

'Tell her that Giuliana is asleep,' I suggested to my mother in a tone of entreaty.

But she warned me that the visitor was waiting in the next room. She would have to be received.

Now the lady in question was a most spiteful and inveterate gossip. She cast a curious and inquiring glance at me from time to time. When, in the course of conversation presently, my mother happened to remark that I had kept the patient company from morning till night, almost from the beginning of her illness, Signora Talice exclaimed in a tone of undisguised irony—

'What a perfect husband!'

My annoyance increased so much that I rose, and, under some trivial pretext, left the room.

I left the house, but on the stairs encountered Maria and Natalia coming in with their governess. They rushed at me as usual, smothering me with kisses, and Maria, the elder of the two, gave me some letters she had got from the hall-porter. Amongst them I instantly noticed the handwriting of the absent one. I shook myself free of the children, almost impatiently, and hurried into the street. Once safely there, I stopped to read the letter.

It was short but passionate, and contained two or three sentences of a nature which Teresa well knew

were calculated to affect me acutely. She informed me that she would be in Florence between the 20th and 25th of the month, and that she would meet me there 'like the time before.' She promised me more definite news at the time of our meeting.

On the instant, all the dreams and plans born of my recent emotion fell from me like the blossoms of a tree that is shaken by a sudden gust of wind. And as the fallen blossoms are irretrievably lost to the tree, so it is with the things of the soul; to me, it was as if they had never been. I made an effort to collect myself, but to no purpose. I set off aimlessly strolling through the streets; I went into a confectioner's and into a book shop, and bought sweets and books mechanically. Evening began to close in; the lamps were lighted; the pavements were crowded; two or three ladies responded to my bow from their carriages; a friend passed me with his sweetheart who was carrying a great bunch of roses, they were walking fast and talking and laughing gaily. The venomous breath of city life enveloped me, and all my thirst for fresh sensations, my sensual appetite, my vicious curiosity, awoke with redoubled vigour. Teresa had laid hold upon me once more by those words in her letter, and my whole desire went out to her unrestrainedly.

But when the first tumult of feeling had somewhat abated, and I was mounting the stairs in my own house, I grasped the full gravity of what had occurred, of what I had done; I saw clearly that, only a few hours before, I had in reality renewed a bond, engaged my honour, made a promise—tacit, no doubt, but none the less solemn—to a poor unsuspecting creature who was still weak and ill; I

knew that I could not draw back without infamy. How I regretted having let myself be tricked by that deceptive emotion! How could I have been such a fool as to allow a sentimental languor to steal over me! I carefully examined every word and deed that day with all the cold subtlety of a fraudulent tradesman seeking for some loophole by which to escape from certain stipulations in a contract already concluded. Ah, my last words had been too binding! That 'you could forget,' spoken in such a tone after reading those verses, had all the weight of a definite confirmation. And Giuliana's 'silence' had set the seal upon it.

'But,' thought I, 'does she really believe this time in my repentance? Was she not habitually somewhat sceptical on the subject of my good intentions?' and again I saw the mistrustful smile that had appeared many a time upon her lips. 'If at the bottom of her heart she does not believe in it, if her illusions, too, have vanished suddenly, then the breaking of my promise will not be such a very serious matter, it will not wound or offend her too deeply; the episode will remain without further consequences, I shall continue to be free as before, and Villalilla will retire again into the realm of dreams.' But now I saw that other smile—new, unexpected, credulous—which the name of Villalilla had brought to her lips. What was I to do? What course to pursue? How restrain myself? Teresa Raffo's letter burned in my pocket.

When I went into Giuliana's room, I saw at a glance that she had been on the watch for me. She seemed in good spirits, her eyes were bright, her pallor less marked.

'Tullio, where have you been?' she laughingly asked.

'Signora Talice routed me,' I replied.

She laughed again—a liquid, girlish laugh that transfigured her. I gave her the books and the box of sweets.

'For me?' she exclaimed delightedly, and like a greedy child hurried to open the box with little graceful movements of the hands that brought back distant memories to my heart. 'For me?'

She took out a bonbon, but in the act of carrying it to her mouth she hesitated, dropped it, and pushing away the box, she said—'Presently, presently——'

'Do you know, Tullio,' said my mother, 'she has not eaten anything yet. She insisted on waiting for you.'

'Ah, by the by, I have not told you yet,' broke in Giuliana, flushing rosy-red. 'I have not told you that the doctor was here while you were out. He says I am much better. I am to get up on Thursday—do you hear that, Tullio? I may get up on Thursday. And in ten days, or a fortnight at most, I shall be able to travel.'

Then, after a little pause, she murmured softly—

'Villalilla!'

So she had thought of nothing, dreamed of nothing else! So she *had believed*, after all—*she believed.* I had the utmost difficulty in concealing my agitation; and busied myself with extra assiduity in the preparations for her little meal, finally placing the tray myself upon her knees.

She followed my every movement with a caressing gaze that positively hurt me. 'Ah, if she could guess!' Suddenly my mother exclaimed, in tones of frank admiration—

'How beautiful you look this evening, Giuliana!'

It was quite true; an extraordinary animation lit up her whole face and beamed from her eyes; she looked years younger. At my mother's exclamation, she blushed, and the shadow of that blush remained on her cheeks during the rest of the evening.

'I am going to get up on Thursday,' she repeated. 'Thursday—only three days more! I shall have forgotten how to walk.'

She persistently returned to the subject of her cure and of our departure to the country, and asked my mother for details as to the state of the villa and of the garden.

'I planted a slip of willow close to the fish-pond the last time I was there—do you remember, Tullio? I wonder if I shall find it there still?'

'Yes, yes,' answered my mother, beaming with delight, 'you will; it has come on well—it is quite a tree now; you can ask Federico.'

'Really, really? But tell me, mama——'

This little detail appeared to be of incalculable importance to her at the moment. She became gaily talkative. I could not help marvelling that she should give the rein so completely to her imagination, should be so transfigured by a mere dream. 'Oh, why, why did she believe just this time? How can she let herself be so carried away—whence this unusual confidence?' The thought of my meditated treachery, though it was unavoidable, filled me with impotent rage.

'But why unavoidable? Was I never to throw off that bondage? I *ought to*—I *must* fulfil my promise. My mother was a witness to that promise; cost it what it may, I will keep it.' And with a strong

effort, almost, as it were, a violent shake of my conscience, I threw off my indecision and turned with the whole strength of my soul to Giuliana.

Her beauty struck me afresh; thus excited, gay and young, she reminded me of the Giuliana of old whom I had so often startled out of the tranquillity of our home life by suddenly snatching her to my breast, and kissing her with all the mad ardour of a lover.

'No, no, mama; don't make me drink any more,' she begged, preventing my mother from pouring out more wine. 'I have drunk too much already without noticing. Ah, that Chablis! Do you remember, Tullio?'

And she laughed into my eyes as she evoked a memory of our love over which floated the delicate aroma of that pale golden wine she preferred before all others.

'Yes, I remember.'

She closed her eyes with a quiver of the lashes; then she said: 'It is very warm in here, surely. My ears are burning.'

She pressed her hands to each side of her head to feel the heat. The lamp which burned beside the bed lit up intensely the oval lines of her face, and struck out gleams of gold from the ripples of her chestnut hair just above the small delicate ears, now tipped with red.

Shortly afterwards, when I was relieving her of the tray (my mother and the maid had gone into the next room for a moment), she whispered—

'Tullio!' and, drawing me down to her with a furtive gesture, she pressed a kiss upon my cheek.

Now, by that kiss, surely she might lay claim to me again, body and soul, for ever? Such an act, on

the part of one so reserved and proud, must mean that she had put away from her all the remembrance of the past in order to begin life anew with me. Could she have given herself to me again with more touching grace, with more entire confidence? At one stroke, the sister had changed back into the wife —the wife who still preserved in her secret heart the memory of my kisses, that physical memory of sensations which is so vivid and so tenacious in woman. Reviewing it all again when I was alone that night, I had interrupted visions of days gone by, of certain evenings in the far past. A warm, rosy June twilight, fraught with mysterious perfumes, the kind of evening so dreadful to the solitary and to those who regret, or who desire in vain. I enter a room; she is sitting near the window, an open book in her lap—languid, deadly pale, apparently half-fainting. 'Giuliana!' She starts, and raises herself. 'What is the matter?' 'Nothing,' she replies; and an indefinable agitation like the struggle of things suppressed passes in her dilated eyes. How often since those days of sad renunciation has she suffered tortures in her poor flesh? My thoughts lingered round the images suggested by her recent little outburst of affection, and these thoughts led me to decide in my own mind in favour of my promise.

But when I awoke the next morning, I had but a confused recollection of all that had passed. My vileness and unrest took immediate possession of me again the moment I set eyes on a letter from Teresa Raffo, in which she fixed our meeting at Florence for the 21st, adding precise instructions as to time and place. The 21st was a Saturday, and on Thursday, the 19th, Giuliana was to get up for the first

time. For long I discussed every possibility with myself. Disputing thus, I began to waver in my decision. Yes, there was no doubt about it; the rupture is both necessary and inevitable. But how to bring it about? under what pretext? Can I announce my decision to Teresa simply by letter? My very last was still hot with passion, full of fierce desire. How could I justify such a sudden change? Did my poor friend deserve so brutal and unexpected a blow? She had loved me deeply, loved me still; she had, at one time, braved a good deal for my sake. I had loved her, and did so still. Our grand and singular passion was well known, was even looked upon with envious and unfriendly eyes. How many men cherished the ambition of supplanting me! Their name was legion. I rapidly went over the rivals I had most to fear, my most probable successors. 'Is there in all Rome a lovelier, a more fascinating, a more desirable woman than she?' I asked myself; and the thought of voluntarily renouncing her seemed to me absurd, inadmissible. 'No, no, I should never have the strength of mind; I could not, and I will not do it.' And although, the first tumult of my mind having subsided, I recommenced my futile debate with myself, at the bottom of my heart I knew full well that when the moment came I should not be able to resist the call.

However, I had the courage, on leaving the invalid's room, and being thrilled by emotion—I had the supreme courage to write to Teresa, 'I am not coming.' I invented some excuse, and I remember well that, half-unconsciously, I chose one that should not sound too serious. 'So you hope

that she will take no heed of your excuse and insist upon your coming?' cried a voice within me. I could not escape from this sarcasm, and a fierce anxiety and irritation took hold upon me and gave me no rest. I made incredible efforts to dissemble before Giuliana and my mother; studiously avoided being alone with the poor deluded creature; and every moment I seemed to read in her gentle, glistening eyes the first shadow of a doubt; I fancied I saw a cloud pass over her pure brow.

On Wednesday I received an imperious and threatening telegram (had I not more than half expected it?): 'Either you come, or you never see me again. Answer.' And I answered: 'Will come.'

Immediately upon this, moved by that species of unconscious over-excitement which accompanies all the decisive acts of one's life, I felt a distinct relief; circumstances seemed to be determining their own course. The sense of my irresponsibility, the sense of the necessity of all that had happened, and of all that was going to happen, impressed me profoundly. 'If, although fully conscious of the evil I am doing, and although I condemn myself I still cannot act otherwise, it is clear that I am obeying a superior power of which I am ignorant. I am the victim of a cruel Fate, a Fate that is both ironical and invincible.'

Nevertheless, as I stood upon the threshold of Giuliana's room, a horrible weight seemed to fall upon my heart; I swayed giddily behind the portière. 'She has only to look at me, and she will guess all in a moment,' was my terrified thought. I was on the point of turning back when she called, in a voice that had never sounded to me so sweet—

'Is that you, Tullio?'

I came forward a step. She looked at me.

'Tullio,' she screamed, 'what is it? Are you ill?'

'A little giddy—it is passing over,' I answered; and I reassured myself, saying: 'She does not guess.'

And in truth, she was quite unconscious of any cause for doubt, though it seemed to me most strange that such should be the case. Should I prepare her for the brutal stroke? Should I speak to her frankly, or fabricate some specious lie? Or should I slip away without a word of warning, leaving her my confession in a letter? Which would be the most preferable course? Which would make the blow less difficult for me, and the surprise less cruel to her?

To my shame be it said, that in this difficult debate an instinct of selfishness led me to consider what would be the least painful to me, rather than to her; and I would assuredly have chosen the secret departure and the letter, had I not been restrained by the thought of my mother. She must be spared at any price. Here, again, I was forced to listen to that sarcastic voice: 'Ah, indeed, at *any* price? Generous soul! Then, how extremely convenient that you should always be sure of having the old price to fall back upon. Say but the word, and once more the victim will force herself to smile though the blow be mortal. Throw yourself upon her, therefore, oh generous heart, and there will be no need to trouble about the rest.'

We find real comfort at times in a sincere and boundless self-contempt.

'What are you thinking about so hard, Tullio?'

asked Giuliana, laying a coaxing finger between my knitted brows as if to check the thought.

I took her hand and held it without answering, and this silence alone sufficed to modify anew the attitude of my mind; the fond voice, the pretty gesture of the unsuspecting creature melted me, and aroused in me that sentiment which is the facile source of tears—self-commiseration. I had an ardent longing to be pitied. At the same time, something within me said:—Take advantage of this disposition of spirit without revealing anything for the moment. By a slight extra effort you can easily work yourself up to the point of tears. You know how enormously women are affected by the tears of the man they love. Giuliana will be heart-broken, and you will appear to be in the throes of some overwhelming mental agony. Then to-morrow, when you tell her the truth, the recollection of those tears will raise you mightily in her eyes. She will think—Ah, then that was the cause of his bitter weeping yesterday. Poor love! And you will not be condemned as the despicable egoist you are, but you will appear to have struggled with all your force against who knows what dark powers, to be the victim of some mysterious and irremediable distemper, to bear in your breast a lacerated heart.

'Have you something on your mind?' asked Giuliana in low, caressing tones, full of confidence.

I hung my head; I was unfeignedly touched. But my physical preparations for these *profitable* tears disturbed my sentiment, robbed them of spontaneity, and retarded their production. What if I find myself unable to weep—if the tears will not come? I thought, seized with ridiculous and puerile dis-

couragement, as if everything depended solely on this silly little circumstance which my will was not strong enough to bring about. And the same voice within me continued :—It is a thousand pities! No moment could be more propitious; she can hardly see you now—a sob out of the deepening shadows—how extremely effective!

'You do not answer me, Tullio?' Giuliana resumed after a pause, passing her hand gently over my brow so that I should look up. 'There is nothing you cannot say to me—you know that.'

Ah, truly, no other human voice I have ever heard could express such infinite depths of kindness. Even my mother never spoke to me like that.

My eyes grew moist, I felt a hot tear upon my lashes. Now, now is the moment to break down! But I could only produce that one, and so (it is humiliating but true, and, moreover, the manifestation of most human emotion is spoiled by some such wretched trick as this) I raised my face so that Giuliana might notice it, and for some seconds went through an agony of fear lest she should miss the glitter of it in the gathering darkness. As if to draw her attention to it, I held my breath hard, as one does to repress a sob. She put her face close to mine to see me more distinctly, and, as I remained silent, she repeated—

'You do not answer?'

Then she saw it.

To make sure, she took my face between her hands and drew me to her almost roughly.

'Tears?' she exclaimed, and her voice trembled.

I freed myself hurriedly and rose to take refuge in flight, as one who can no longer control his anguish.

'Let me go, Giuliana; let me go!' and I rushed from the room.

Once alone, I was overwhelmed with disgust at myself.

It was the eve of a great day for the invalid. A few hours later, when I presented myself before her again, to assist as usual at the ceremony of her little dinner, I found my mother with her.

'Well, Tullio!' the latter exclaimed the moment I entered, 'to-morrow is the great day!'

Giuliana and I glanced furtively at one another. Then we began to discuss the morrow, the hour at which she should get up, and a thousand minute details with a certain exaggerated interest and yet somewhat preoccupied. I hoped to Heaven my mother would not leave us alone.

Luckily, she only left the room once and returned almost immediately. Giuliana seized that opportunity to whisper hurriedly: 'What was the matter just now? Will you not tell me?'

'Nothing—nothing.'

'Then you will spoil all my pleasure to-morrow.'

'No, no. I will tell you—I will tell you—presently. Don't think about it now, please.'

Here my mother returned, bringing the two children with her; but the tone in which Giuliana had uttered these few words, convinced me that she had no suspicion whatever of the truth. Did she perhaps imagine that my depression was owing to the overshadowing memory of my ineffable and inexpiable past? Did she think I was tortured by remorse for the wrongs I had inflicted on her, and the fear that I was unworthy of her full pardon?

There was great excitement next morning. At

Giuliana's request I was to wait in the adjoining room till she called me.

'Come in now, Tullio.'

I went in and found her standing, looking taller and slighter than before her illness, and very fragile. A kind of robe, ample and flowing, fell in long straight folds to her feet. She was smiling and a little nervous, hardly able to control herself, and holding out her arms to each side as if trying to keep her balance in that way, and turning first to me and then to my mother.

My mother watched her with an expression of indescribable fondness, prepared on the instant to support her. I too held out my hands.

'No, no,' she cried, 'leave me alone—I shall not fall. I want to get as far as the arm-chair by myself.'

She put out one foot and took a step forward, very cautiously. Her face was radiant with simple child-like glee.

'Take care now, Giuliana!'

She advanced another step or two; then, seized with sudden panic, hesitated an instant between my mother and me, and cast herself into my arms, on to my breast, hanging there with all her weight, her breath coming in quick sobs. But she was only laughing and a little breathless from fright. As I held her firmly, I could feel her slender pliant form beneath my hands, felt her all palpitating and warm against my breast, inhaled the fragrance of her hair, and my eyes caught sight again of the little beauty spots on her neck.

'I was so frightened,' she panted, laughing. 'I thought I was going to fall.'

And as she turned her head to look at my mother, but without loosening her hold on me, I saw the convulsive agitation of her face, and recognised with full force that I held in my arms a poor sick creature, terribly weakened by illness, her nerves enfeebled, her strength undermined, perhaps incurably so. But I remembered her transfigured face on the evening of that unexpected kiss, and the labour of love, of kindness, of amendment which I had decided to renounce, appeared to me once more in all its beauty.

'You help me to the arm-chair, Tullio,' she said.

Putting my arm round her waist, I led her slowly forward; I helped her to settle herself comfortably and arranged the cushions at her back, choosing, I remember, the one with the most delicate and pleasing tones to rest her head against. Then I knelt down and placed a cushion under her slender feet. As on that other evening, she followed my every action with her caressing eyes, and so I lingered purposely over my task. I set a little table beside her and on it a vase of fresh flowers, a book and an ivory paper-cutter. Unconsciously, I was guilty of a certain ostentation in these several acts.

The mocking voice began again. 'Vastly clever! Vastly clever! All this done under your mother's eye will be invaluable to you. How should she suspect anything wrong after having witnessed such a display of affectionate care? A little exaggeration, too, will do no harm—her sight is not too keen. Go on—go on—all is turning out to your advantage—never fear!'

'Oh, how comfortable this is!' exclaimed Giuliana, closing her eyes with a sigh of relief. 'Thanks, Tullio.'

And a minute or two later, when my mother went away and we were alone, she said again with deep emotion—'Thank you.'

She held out a hand to me that I might take it in mine. Her sleeve was wide, and in the action fell back disclosing the arm almost to the elbow, and that white and faithful hand, which carried with it love, pardon, and peace, dreams and restful oblivion —all things beautiful and all things good—trembled towards me for a moment as if in supreme self-surrender.

I firmly believe that in the hour of death, at that last moment when I shall cease to suffer, I shall see that gesture alone; when every image of my past life has faded away, that one will remain.

When I recall that time, I fail to reconstruct exactly the condition of mind which I was in. Of this I am sure, that I fully recognised the extreme gravity of the moment and the extraordinary value of all that was taking place, and was about to take place. My mental vision was, or seemed to me, perfectly clear. Two absolutely distinct and parallel processes were going on in my mind. In the one, along with my pity for the woman to whom I was about to deal such a blow, I keenly regretted the gifts I was thus putting away from me; in the other, though filled with turbid passion for my absent mistress, my selfishness led me to consider dispassionately all the circumstances most likely to prove favourable to my impunity. These parallel sentiments added incredibly to the intensity and acceleration of the workings of my mind.

The decisive moment had come. If I was to leave to-morrow, further temporising was impossible;

and that the affair might not appear too peculiar and sudden, I must announce my departure to my mother this very morning at lunch and arrange a plausible excuse. It was highly necessary, however, that I should first tell it to Giuliana, to prevent any fatal *contretemps.* 'And what if Giuliana should at last break down? What if, under the stress of pain and indignation, she should disclose the truth to my mother? How obtain a fresh promise of silence, of self-sacrifice from her?' Up till the last moment, I was revolving these questions in my mind. 'Will she understand at the first word? What shall I do if she does not—if she innocently asks me the reason for my going away? How can I answer? But she will understand, never fear; it is impossible that she should not have heard through one of her friends—Signora Talice, for instance—that Teresa Raffo has left Rome.'

But my powers of resistance were beginning to give out. I could not much longer sustain the conflict which raged higher and higher within me every moment. With a sudden tension of all my nerves, I resolved to come to the point, and as she was talking I hoped she herself would offer me an opening for launching the bolt.

She was talking with unusual volubility, chiefly of things in the future. That nameless agitation in her, which I had already noticed, seemed to me more apparent. I was standing behind her chair. Up till now I had studiously avoided facing her, moving about in the room but always behind her: now closing the window curtains, now arranging the books in the little book-case, now gathering up from the carpet the leaves of a faded bouquet of roses. I

stood looking down on the waves of her hair, her long curved lashes, the light flutter of her bosom, and her hands—those beautiful hands lying on the arms of her chair—as white as on that day when only the blue of the veins distinguished them from the sheet.

That day! Only one week had passed since then. Why should it now seem so remote?

So I stood behind her, my nerves at their extreme point of tension, on the watch, as it were, thinking that some instinct must warn her of the sword hanging over her head; and, indeed, I fancied I observed a kind of vague distress in her. Once again an intolerable pang shot through my heart.

At last, the moment arrived when she said—

'*To-morrow*, if I am better, you must take me down on to the terrace, into the open air.'

I broke in—

'*To-morrow* I shall not be here.'

She started at the strange tone of my voice. I went on without waiting—

'I am going away.'

Then, loosening my tongue with an effort, I added, with the shuddering horror of one who has to repeat the blow in order to finish off the victim—

'I am going to Florence.'

'Ah!'

She had understood instantly. With a rapid, violent movement, she turned herself completely round upon the cushions and looked at me.

'Giuliana!' I stammered, unable to find anything else to say, and bending over her afraid that she was going to faint.

But she closed her eyes and shrank back, shivering

convulsively, as if seized with sudden cold. So she remained for a minute or two motionless, with closed eyes and mouth tightly drawn. Only the pulsation visible in the arteries of her neck and a slightly convulsive movement of her hands gave any sign of life.

Was it not a crime? It was the *first* of my crimes, and not perhaps the least of them either.

I left home in a terrible state of mind. I was away for more than a week. When I came back, and in the days that followed my return, I was myself amazed at my almost cynical effrontery. I was possessed by a very devil which seemed to destroy all moral sense in me and render me capable of any baseness, any cruelty. Again Giuliana showed her prodigious powers of self-command; again she had kept her own counsel. She seemed enclosed within her silence as in impenetrable adamantine armour.

She took the children and went back with my mother to La Badiola. My brother accompanied them—I remained behind in Rome.

From that date began the darkest and most wretched period of my life, to which I cannot look back, even now, without being overwhelmed with disgust and humiliation. Held fast by that sentiment which, more than any other, can stir the sediment of foulness that underlies our nature, I suffered all the vile torments a woman will inflict upon an enervated, passionate, and unceasingly active spirit. Kindled by some spark of suspicion, a fierce sensual jealousy blazed up in me, drying all the well-springs of good, and feeding eagerly on the substratum of evil in the depths of my being.

Never had Teresa Raffo seemed so desirable as now, though indissolubly connected with my lowest degradations. And she made use of my very self-contempt to put a keener edge on my passion. Nameless agonies, debasing joys, ignoble submissions, vile compacts proposed and accepted without a blush, tears more bitter than any poison, sudden frenzies that drove me to the verge of madness, headlong falls into abysses of depravity that left me stunned and stupefied for days together, all the misery and all the ignominies of carnal passion exasperated by jealousy I went through. I became a stranger to my own home; Giuliana's presence was an irritating reproach to me. Whole weeks went by without my addressing a word to her. Absorbed in my own torments, I neither saw nor heard her. At times, when I did happen to look at her, I was struck by her pallor, by her expression, or by some detail of her face as something new, unexpected, and strange to me. I could not succeed in regaining my sense of the reality of things. I was utterly ignorant of how she passed her days. I felt no desire to ask her; nor did I feel any anxiety, or solicitude, or fear on her account. An inexplicable hardness of heart alienated me from her. Sometimes, even, I felt a sort of vague, unreasoning grudge against her. One day I heard her laugh, and the sound irritated me, made me feel almost angry.

Another day, my heart beat fast on hearing her voice singing in a distant room.

Che farò senza Euridice?

she sang. It was the first time for long that she sang like this as she moved about the house, or that

I heard her. Why was she singing? Did she feel so light-hearted? To what emotion of her soul was this unusual effusiveness the response? I felt inexplicably perturbed, and went towards her without reflecting, calling her by name.

When she caught sight of me entering her room, she stood a moment in dumb astonishment—a little frightened and in obvious suspense.

'You were singing?' I said awkwardly, just for the sake of saying something, and surprised myself at my extraordinary act.

She smiled—a little deprecating smile, not knowing what to answer nor what attitude to adopt towards me. I seemed to read in her eyes a painful curiosity—nor was this the first time that I noticed it—that compassionate curiosity with which we regard a person suspected of madness. At the same moment, I caught sight of my reflection in a mirror opposite: my fleshless face, my hollow sunken eyes, my tumid lips, all that aspect of fevered wasting I had had for some months now.

'Were you dressing to go out?' I asked her with the same awkward shyness, not having any other question ready and yet not wishing to keep silent.

'Yes.'

It was a morning in November. She was standing beside a lace-draped table on which lay scattered those innumerable dainty toilet accessories so indispensable to the modern beauty. She wore a dress of some dark woollen material, and in her hand she held a pale gold-coloured tortoiseshell comb with a silver back. The dress was most simple in style, doing justice to the slender elegance of her figure. A great bunch of white chrysanthemums stood on

the table and reached almost as high as her shoulder. The mild sunshine of the Saint Martin's summer streamed through the window, and in the air there floated a faint scent which I did not recognise.

'What scent do you use now?' I asked.

'Crab-apple,' she replied.

'I like it.'

She took a bottle off the table and handed it to me. I smelled at it for a long time, just for something to do and also to gain time to prepare some other remark. I could not throw off my confusion, or regain my self-possession. I felt that all familiarity was over between us for ever. She seemed to me another woman altogether. And all the while, Orpheus' song rang faintly in my ear and disturbed me strangely—

Che farò senza Euridice?

In all that golden light, in that delicate perfume, in the midst of all these objects instinct with feminine grace, the spirit of the old melody seemed to awaken the throb of some hidden life, to diffuse the shadow of some nameless mystery.

'What a lovely air that is you were singing just now!' I said, obeying an impulse that arose out of my uneasiness.

'Yes, isn't it!' she exclaimed.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask: 'But why did you sing?' but I did not, and I searched my mind for a reason for the curiosity which assailed me.

There was an interval of silence. She began running her thumbnail over the teeth of the comb, producing a faint but shrill sound. (That sound has always remained most distinctly in my memory.)

'You were dressing to go out; don't let me interrupt you,' I remarked.

'I have only my hat and jacket to put on. What time is it?'

'A quarter to eleven.'

'Ah, so late as that!'

She took up her hat and her veil, and sat down in front of the glass. I watched her. Another question rose to my lips: 'Where are you going?' but I withheld it, although it would have sounded natural enough.

I continued to watch her attentively, and so I saw her once more as she really was:—a young and beautiful woman, sweet-natured and high-bred, full of physical perfections and illumined by intense spirituality; in a word, a most adorable creature, who might also well be a most entrancing mistress—an ideal companion both for body and soul.

'And what if that were really the case?' I asked myself. 'It is impossible that she should not have been much sought after—my neglect of her is too self-evident, her wrongs too notorious. Has she taken a lover—or is she only on the way to doing so? Has she come at last to the conclusion that it is useless and unjust to sacrifice her youth any longer? Has she, at last, grown weary of perpetual abnegation? Perhaps she has come to know a man superior to me—a delicately and profoundly seductive lover, who will initiate her into the charms of novelty and teach her to forget the faithless one. What if I had lost all hold over the heart I had so often wounded without pity and without remorse?' Sudden fear took possession of me and gripped my heart so fiercely, that I thought to myself: 'I will confess my

doubt to her on the spot. I will look her full in the face and say, "Are you still *pure?*" And I shall know the truth at once. She is incapable of lying. Incapable of lying? Ah, ah, ah! a woman? What do you know about it? A woman is capable of anything. Remember that. A mantle of heroism is often wide enough to cover half a dozen lovers. Self-sacrifice? Abnegation? Mere show!—words! Who could ever know the truth? Swear, if you can, to the fidelity of your wife; not of to-day, but only of the time before her last illness. Swear in perfect faith—if you can!' And the malignant voice (ah, Teresa Raffo, your venom worked well!), the perfidious voice exasperated me.

'Tullio,' said Giuliana a little shyly, 'would you mind putting this pin in my veil for me?'

Her arms were curved high towards the top of her head, and her fingers sought vainly to fasten her veil. The attitude was full of grace, and, looking at her white fingers, I thought to myself: 'What a long time it is since we have pressed each other's hand! Ah, the warm clasp she used to give me, as if to show me that she bore me no grudge, no matter what I had done! Now, maybe, that hand is no longer pure——' And while I fastened her veil, I was seized with sudden repulsion at the thought of her possible infidelity.

She rose, and I helped her to put on her jacket. Two or three times our eyes met in a fleeting glance, but again I read in hers a kind of frightened curiosity. Doubtless she was asking herself: 'Why has he come in here? What is keeping him? What is the meaning of his strange embarrassment? What does he want of me? Has something happened?'

'Excuse me—one moment,' she said, and left the room; and I heard her calling to Miss Edith, the governess.

When I was alone, my eyes involuntarily sought the little writing-table heaped with letters and books. I went over to it, and my eyes wandered over the papers as if tempted to look for—what? *the proof*? But I shook off the mean and unworthy temptation. My attention was attracted by a book in a cover of antique stuff, and with a little silver dagger between the leaves. This must be the book she was just reading; it was only half cut. It was Filippo Arborio's latest novel, *The Secret.* On the flyleaf, I read a dedication in the handwriting of the author:—*To Giuliana Hermil,* TVRRIS EBVRNEA, *In all humility. F. Arborio. All Saints' Day,* 18—.

So Giuliana knew the novelist? What was Giuliana's attitude of mind towards him? And I recalled the refined and attractive face of the writer, whom I had seen once or twice in public places. He might very well be attractive to Giuliana. Judging by various rumours I had heard, he was a favourite with the women. His novels, which were full of complicated psychology, sometimes keenly analytical, often false, perturbed the sentiment and kindled the imagination, and inculcated with great literary elegance a supreme contempt for the commonplace. *An Agony, The Catholicissima, Angelica Doni, Giorgio Aliora, The Secret,* presented a vision of life at white heat, like some fiery furnace in which moved innumerable intensely glowing figures. Each one of his personages fought for his particular chimera in a desperate hand-to-hand struggle with the realities of life.

Now, had not this extraordinary genius, whose books represented, so to speak, the sublimated spiritual essence of himself—had not this man exercised a great fascination over me, too? Had I not said that his *Giorgio Aliora* was a 'fraternal' book? In certain of his characters I had discovered strange resemblances to my own inner being. Might not this strange affinity between us have paved the way for the work of seduction he had perhaps undertaken? Giuliana may have surrendered to him, just because she recognised in him some of the same attractions which had endeared me to her in days gone by.

She re-entered the room. As she caught sight of the book in my hands, she smiled a little confusedly, and said, with a slight flush—

'What have you got there?'

'Do you know Filippo Arborio?' I asked, in as calm and unsuspicious a tone as possible.

'Yes,' she replied quite frankly. 'He was introduced to me at the Monterisi's. He has been here two or three times, but never had an opportunity of meeting you.'

'Then why have you never mentioned him to me?' was on the tip of my tongue to ask her, but I did not. Was it likely that she should speak to me about that, or anything else, when, for so long, my own manner had prevented any attempt at friendly intercourse between us?

'That is quite the least intricate of his books,' she went on unconcernedly, slowly drawing on her gloves. 'Have you read it?'

'Yes, I have read it.'

'Did you like it?'

Without reflection, merely from an instinctive desire to show off my superiority before Giuliana, I answered—

'No; I thought it decidedly mediocre.'

There was a pause. Then—'I am going,' she said.

She moved towards the door and I followed her into the hall, walking in the traces of the delicate perfume she left behind her, so faint as to be hardly perceptible. Only in the presence of the man-servant did she turn to me and say, '*A rivederci!*' and with a light step she passed out into the street.

I hurried back to my rooms, opened the window and leaned out to watch her as she went.

She was walking with her light and elastic step along the sunny side of the pavement—straight on, never turning her head to right or left. The sun of the Saint Martin's summer faintly gilded the crystal clear sky, and a gentle warmth tempered the autumn air, evoking the perfume of violets that were no more. A measureless wretchedness fell upon me, weighing me down and becoming by degrees intolerable. Rarely, in my whole life, had I suffered as I did now at the suspicion which, at one blow, had caused my faith in Giuliana to crumble into dust—the solid faith of years; seldom, indeed, had my soul cried aloud so despairingly after a dream that had fled. But had it really fled so irrevocably? I could not, would not, allow myself to believe that. Through all these erring years I had ever been accompanied by that vision, which not only responded to the most exacting demands of my egotism, but represented my highest ideal of moral grandeur: 'Moral grandeur being the result of violent griefs overcome, it was

necessary, if she was to attain to these heroic heights, that she should go through all I had made her suffer.' This axiom, with which I had so often soothed my conscience, was deep-rooted in my soul, and generated there an ideal to which the better part of me offered up a sort of platonic worship. Dissolute, warped and weak of will, it yet pleased me to know that, bound within the circle of my life there dwelt a spirit, severely upright, strong and incorruptible; it was my pride to know myself the one for ever beloved object of that spirit. Through all my depravity, my wretchedness, my weakness, that illusion was my one prop and mainstay. I thought that for me, at least, the dream of every intellectual man—to be constantly faithless to a constantly faithful woman—was realised.

'What do you desire after? All the most intoxicating pleasures of life? Go, then—find them—drink your fill. In your home, like a veiled image in a sanctuary, the patient creature will await you, for ever silent, for ever heedful of your comfort. The lamp into which you never pour one drop of oil, burns steadily on. No matter at what hour—after what experiences—you return, you will find her ready to welcome you. She has waited long for the return which she was certain would occur, but she will not complain to you of her weary vigil. You can lay your head upon her knees and she will pass her white fingers tenderly over your brow and charm away all your pain.' Is not this the dream of every man of intellect?

And I had always had a foreshadowing of some such return in my mind; finally, after one of those cataclysms which thoroughly transform a man. My

deepest despair had always been tempered by an unquestioning confidence in my possession of that refuge, and into my darkest moments there always fell some ray of light from the woman who, for love of me and *by my agency*, had reached that moral altitude which satisfied so perfectly one of my ideals.

Could a mere suspicion suffice to destroy all this in a moment?

I went over the whole scene between me and Giuliana, from the moment I entered her room till the moment she left the house.

Although attributing the greater part of my inward emotion to a peculiar but transitory condition of my nerves, I could not rid myself of the strange impression expressed in my thought: 'She seemed to me altogether *another woman*.' Something new there certainly was in her—but what? Might not Filippo Arborio's dedication admit of a reassuring interpretation? Did it not rather confirm the impregnability of the *Turris Eburnea*? The flattering epithet must have been suggested either by the halo of purity that surrounded the name of Giuliana Hermil, or by an attempt to storm the fortress which, proving unsuccessful, had probably led him to abandon the enterprise altogether. The Tower of Ivory therefore must still be inviolate.

But as I argued thus with myself, striving to heal the venomous serpent-bite of my suspicion, a vague disquiet stirred in my heart; I half feared and expected the sudden appearance of some ironical counter-suggestion. 'You know—none better—that Giuliana's skin is extraordinarily white. The sacred epithet might well mask a profane interpretation.' But then, that '*In all humility*'?

A rush of fretful irritation interrupted my fruitless and puerile debate. With a shrug of the shoulders, I left the window, took two or three turns about the room, opened a book mechanically and shut it again without reading a line. My perturbation showed no signs of decreasing. 'Put it how you like,' I said to myself, standing still as if to confront an invisible adversary; 'it all comes briefly to this —either she has already fallen and is irretrievably lost to me, or she is in danger of so doing, and I, in my present state, am totally unable to come to her rescue; or, again, she has kept herself secure in the strong armour of her purity, and so nothing is changed. In any case, I can do nothing. Whatever is, is necessary, and whatever will be, is necessary also. This crisis will pass; we can but wait and see. Those white chrysanthemums on Giuliana's table were beautiful! I shall go out and buy a great bunch like them. My appointment to-day with Teresa is at two o'clock. I have nearly three hours till then. Did she not say last time that she wanted to find the fire lighted when next she came? It will be the first fire of winter—on such a mild day, too. This seems to be one of her good weeks—if it would only last! But the very first chance I have, I mean to provoke Eugenio Egano.'

My thoughts pursued their new course, sometimes flying off at a tangent on unexpected side-issues. Certain burning passages from *The Secret* returned to my mind, and I began, though with a widely different sting of pain, to confound the two women in one contaminating jealousy, and to mete out the same loathing to Filippo Arborio as to Eugenio Egano.

This crisis passed, but left in my soul a species of vague contempt, not unmixed with rancour, against my *sister*. I kept more and more away from home; became ever harder, more neglectful, more morose. My miserable passion for Teresa Raffo became ever more exacting, occupied my every faculty, never allowed me one hour of respite. I was in very truth a man possessed, a prey to a devilish madness, consumed by a nameless and appalling disease. The memory of that winter is dim and incoherent in my mind, and broken by strange intervals of complete obscurity.

Throughout that time, I never once met Filippo Arborio in my own house, and only a few times caught sight of him in public. But one evening I came across him in the fencing-school, and being introduced by the fencing-master, we exchanged a few words. The flare of gas, the rumbling echo from the ceiling, the clash and glitter of blades, the various postures, awkward or graceful, of the fencers, the quick stamp of feet, the hot and acrid exhalations from so many bodies, guttural cries, vehement exclamations, bursts of laughter, all go to make up a singularly vivid picture in my memory of the scene which surged around us while we stood opposite to one another and the master pronounced our respective names. I can still see the gesture with which Arborio raised his mask and disclosed his heated face, all streaming with perspiration. With his mask in one hand and his foil in the other, he bowed. He was very much done up and out of breath, as if he were not in the habit of taking regular exercise. Instinctively I thought to myself that he was not a man to be feared on the duelling

ground. I affected a certain superciliousness, and purposely avoided the slightest allusion to his literary fame or my admiration; I simply treated him as I would any ordinary stranger.

'Well,' said the *maître d'armes* to me with a smile, 'so it is fixed for to-morrow?'

'Yes, at ten.'

'A duel?' asked Arborio, with undisguised curiosity.

'Yes.'

He hesitated a moment; then he added: 'With whom, if it is not indiscreet to ask?'

'With Eugenio Egano.'

I saw that he was anxious to know more, but that my repellent and apparently uninterested manner discouraged him from asking further.

'Maestro, five minutes with the foils, if you please,' I said, and went over to the dressing-room. In the doorway I stopped a moment to watch Arborio, who had resumed his fencing. A glance was enough to show me that he was a most indifferent swordsman.

Directly I began my passage of arms with the master, under the eyes of all present, a peculiar nervous excitement took possession of me which doubled my energies. I felt Filippo Arborio's gaze riveted upon me.

We met again afterwards in the dressing-room. The low-roofed apartment reeked with smoke and a nauseating odour of humanity, emanating from the crowd of half-naked men who were slowly rubbing themselves down while they smoked and exchanged coarse witticisms at the pitch of their voices. Great roars of laughter mingled with the rushing of the water-taps. Two or three times, with an indefinable

sense of repulsion causing me to recoil as from a violent blow, I caught sight of Arborio's flaccid, unmuscular form.

No other occasion arose, after that, for bringing me in contact with him. Not that I cared; nor did I notice anything suspicious in Giuliana's conduct. Outside the rapidly narrowing circle in which I moved, nothing seemed to affect me, or even to be clearly visible. Extraneous impressions passed over me like raindrops over a glowing hot surface; they either rebounded or were dissolved into mist.

Events precipitated themselves. Towards the end of February, after a last and shameless proof of her infidelity, the final rupture occurred between Teresa Raffo and me. I left for Venice by myself.

I remained there for about a month in a state of abject misery, a kind of stupor which the mists and silence of the lagoons only served to deepen. I was conscious of nothing but my isolated existence in the midst of inert phantoms of surrounding things. For long hours together I was insensible to all feeling but the sharp beating of a small artery in my head. For long hours I sat spell-bound by the strange fascination exercised over both soul and body by the continuous and monotonous passage of something seen indistinctly. It poured with rain. Masses of vapour drifted over the face of the waters with a solemn and spectral motion. In the gondola, as on a bier, I sometimes found an imaginary death; and when the gondolier asked me where he should row me to, I answered with a vain gesture, and in my heart I understood the despairing sincerity of the words: '*Anywhere, anywhere, out of the world!*'

I was back in Rome by the end of March. Every-

thing appeared to me in a totally new light, as after a long spell of unconsciousness. A timid bewilderment, an unreasoning fear, would come over me suddenly at intervals, and I felt as weak as a child. I found myself looking about me continually with unaccustomed earnestness, to renew my hold upon the true significance of things, to readjust their proper relations to one another, to account to myself for the changes that had taken place, for what had disappeared. And as, by degrees, I re-entered upon the path of ordinary life and I slowly regained my balance, hope awoke once more in my breast, and I began to look forward again to the future.

I found Giuliana greatly run down in health and strength, and more deeply depressed than I had ever known her. We rarely spoke to one another, studiously avoided one another's eyes, never attempted to unburden our hearts. We both sought refuge in the society of the children, and they, in happy ignorance, filled up our silence with their fresh sweet voices.

'Mama,' asked Maria one day, 'are we going to Badiola this year for Easter?'

'Yes,' I answered quickly, instead of her mother; 'we are.'

At this, she began jumping about the room for joy, dragging her sister round with her. I looked at Giuliana.

'Would you like it?' I asked her timidly, almost humbly.

She nodded.

'I can see that you are far from well,' I went on. 'I, too, feel very much out of sorts. I daresay the change to the country—the spring——'

She was lying back in a deep chair, her hands extended listlessly upon the arms; and her attitude reminded me of how she looked on the morning of her convalescence, after my disclosure.

It was decided that we should go, and we began our preparations. A spark of hope gleamed in the depths of my soul, but I dared not look at it closely.

CHAPTER II

THIS is my first recollection; by which I mean the first connected with the dread occurrence.

It was, as I have said, April, and we had been for some days at Badiola.

'My dear children,' my mother had exclaimed in her innocent solicitude, 'you both look completely worn out! Ah, that Rome! that Rome! You will have to stay here with me in the country for a long time to recruit—a long time.'

To which Giuliana replied, with a smile: 'Yes, mama, we will stay as long as you like.'

That smile returned frequently to Giuliana's lips in my mother's presence; and although the mournful sadness of her eyes was unchanged, that smile was so sweet, so boundlessly kind, that even I allowed myself to be deceived and plucked up courage to examine the hope in my heart.

In those first days my mother could not tear herself away from her dear guests for a moment, could not do enough to show her fondness. Two or three times, with an indefinable thrill of emotion, I saw her loving hand pass caressingly over Giuliana's hair; once I overheard her say—

'So he is as kind to you as ever?'

'Poor Tullio! Yes,' answered the other voice.

'So it is not true——'

'What?'

'What they hinted to me——'

'What did they hint?'

'Oh, nothing—nothing. I only thought Tullio had perhaps given you some cause for annoyance.'

They were talking near an open window behind the waving curtains, while outside the elms swayed and rustled in the wind. I had come up without their being aware of me, and now drew back the curtain and disclosed myself.

'Ah, Tullio!' exclaimed my mother; and the two women exchanged glances, somewhat confused.

'We were speaking of you,' continued my mother.

'Of me? Something bad?' I asked gaily.

'No; good,' answered Giuliana instantly, and by her emphasis I recognised her intention of *reassuring* me.

The April sun poured down upon the window-ledge, glistened upon my mother's white hair and wakened gleams of gold among the soft curls about Giuliana's forehead. The white curtains waved to and fro reflected in the windows. The tall elms on the terrace kept up an incessant little rustle among their tender new leaves, now loud, now soft, to which the flitting shadows kept time. The very walls of the house seemed to give out a Paschal perfume, a breath of frankincense and myrrh.

'How strong the lilacs smell!' murmured Giuliana, passing her hand over her brow and half closing her eyes. 'It is overpowering.'

I was between her and my mother, but a little in the rear. A strong desire came over me to lean forward and clasp an arm about each of them. Into that simple little piece of familiarity I would have put all the tenderness that was swelling my heart and made Giuliana understand a host of things I could

not express, and have won her back to me by that single action. But I was still prevented by a feeling of shyness that seemed almost puerile.

'Look, Giuliana,' said my mother, pointing to a spot on the hillside, 'there is your Villalilla. Can you see it?'

'Yes, yes.'

She shaded her eyes from the sun with her open hand and gazed intently into the distance; and I, watching her, noticed a slight trembling of her lower lip.

'Can you make out the cypress?' I asked, seeking to increase her agitation by the suggestive question.

And in imagination I once more saw the aged and venerable tree, with a bed of roses at its feet and round its head a chorus of twittering sparrows.

'Yes, yes—I can—just—see it.'

Villalilla gleamed white in the far distance, on a little level space half-way up the hillside. The chain of hills stretched away before us in noble, restful lines; the olive groves upon them looking extraordinarily light and airy, like some greyish-green vapour gathered into definite shape. Blossoming trees, triumphant in their fresh robes of pink and white, broke the monotony. The sky seemed to pale from time to time as if some milky fluid flowed over and mingled with it.

'We must go over to Villalilla after Easter—it will be a mass of flowers,' I said, endeavouring to build up again in her soul the dream I had once so rudely shattered.

And with that I ventured nearer, and winding my arms round Giuliana and my mother, I leaned upon the window-sill between their two heads so that the

hair of each of them brushed my face. The spring, the beneficent air, the noble scene, the placid transfiguration going on everywhere under the maternal hand of Nature, the sky, so divine in its pallor,—all this filled me with a sense of life so new that I asked myself in fear and wonder: 'Can this be true? Can this be true? Is it possible that, after all that has happened, after so much sin and suffering and shame, I can still find so much zest in life—still hope—still have some premonition of happiness? How should I be so blessed?' My whole being seemed to grow lighter, to expand, to overflow its narrow confines with a subtle and incessant vibration. No words of mine can give an adequate idea of all that awoke in me at the touch of that hair against my cheek.

We remained in that position for some moments without speaking. There was no sound but the rustling of the elms. The ceaseless flutter of the little yellow and violet flowers that covered the whole wall beneath the window fascinated my eye. A warm dense perfume rose from the earth with the rhythmic regularity of a breath. Suddenly Giuliana drew away from me and started up, ghastly pale, her eyes dazed, her mouth drawn as if repressing a feeling of nausea.

'The smell of those flowers is dreadful,' she gasped; 'it makes my head swim. Don't you feel it so too, mama?'

She turned away, took one or two uncertain, wavering steps, and then fled from the room followed by my mother.

And I looked after her through the open door, spell-bound by the glamour of that strange new sensation, half in a dream.

CHAPTER III

My confidence in the future increased from day to day. The past seemed almost blotted from my memory. My numbed and wearied spirit forgot to suffer. In certain moments of complete abandon everything seemed to relax, to expand, to melt away, to merge into the elemental fluid and become unrecognisable. And each time after one of these strange dissolvings I felt new life enter into me, fresh strength possess me.

A multitude of involuntary sensations, spontaneous, inconscient, instinctive, went to make up the sum of my real existence. Between the external and the internal there was established a play of instantaneous action and reaction. My whole being would be affected by what went on in the air—by a breeze, a shadow, a gleam of light.

A dire sickness of the soul may, like that of the body, renew a man; and the spiritual convalescence is no less sweet and miraculous than the physical. At the sight of a flowering shrub, of a young shoot growing from a half-decayed tree-trunk, before the humblest flower of the field, the most modest of the transfigurations of the spring, I would stop short in sheer childlike, wondering admiration.

I often went out with my brother in the early morning, at that hour when all is fresh and smiling

and free. Federico's society purified and braced me like the good, wholesome country air. My brother was seven-and-twenty; he had lived almost his whole life in the country, a life of sobriety and labour, and he seemed to have gathered into himself all the warm sincerity of the earth. He possessed the Rule of Life. Leo Tolstoi would have rejoiced to call him son.

We would wander about the fields, rarely conversing at any length, while he praised the fertility of the land, explained some new method of agriculture, or pointed out improvements that had been made. The cottages of our people were roomy, airy, and well kept, our stalls filled with sleek and healthy beasts, our dairies in the most perfect order. Often he would stop to look at some plant, and nothing could exceed the delicacy of his virile hands when they touched the little new green leaves at the end of some slender twig. Sometimes we went through the orchards, where the peach, pear, apple, plum and apricot trees were thick with blossom. As it filtered through the transparent pink and silvery white petals, the sunlight seemed to be converted into a sort of heavenly dew—something indescribably vague and benign; in the small spaces left between the airy garlands, the sky beamed with all the charm of a human gaze.

'Ah,' he said, thinking of the hanging treasure of the future while I praised the flowers; 'wait—you shall see the fruit.'

'Yes,' I said to myself, 'I shall see the blossom fade, and the leaves unfold, and the fruit swell and flush and mature and drop from the tree.' This assurance, coming from my brother's lips, seemed to

me of grave import, as if it referred to I know not what promised and longed-for felicity, which should unfold itself in the days that lay between the blossom and the fruit. 'Before I have made any proposal on the subject, my brother takes it for granted that I shall stay here in the country with him and my mother. He is *quite sure* that I shall see the fruit of his trees! Therefore I may really believe that a new life has begun for me, and that the feeling I have within me does not deceive me. With what strange and unwonted ease everything appears to be accomplishing itself, and with what an abundance of loving-kindness! Never has my brother been so dear to me as now!' Such were my self-communings—somewhat disconnected and rambling, often foolish, through a peculiar tendency I had to look upon many an insignificant little circumstance as a favourable sign, a good omen.

But the source of my keenest joy was the knowledge of being so far removed from the things of the past, so far from certain well-known spots, inaccessible to certain persons. I absorbed into myself the peace of the country and the spring-time, gloating over the space that divided me from that dark world in which I had brought upon myself such bitter suffering and pain. An undefined fear would then come over me, making me look around for proofs of present safety, urging me to slip my arm through that of my brother and read in his eyes his unwavering affection.

In an obscure and roundabout manner, I confided in Federico. I wished not only to be loved but to be ruled by him; willingly would I have yielded my rights as first-born to one so much more worthy than

myself, and would have submitted to his advice, have looked to him for guidance and obeyed his word. Keeping close to his side, I should have run no danger of straying, for he knew the straight path and walked in it with unfaltering step, and his arm was strong to defend and uphold me. He was good and strong and wise—a man to be an Example. Nothing, in my eyes, could equal the nobility of this spectacle of a youth devoted to the religion of 'conscious well-doing,' dedicated to the love of the soil.

'Jesus of the Fields' I had smilingly called him one day.

It was a morning full of innocence, one of those mornings that make one think of primordial dawns in the infancy of the world. In the distance, at the farther end of a field, I saw my brother talking to a group of farm people. He was standing well in front of them, his quiet gestures seconding the simplicity of his words. Men grown grey in experience, men on the verge of old age, listened respectfully to this young man. All bore upon their rugged forms the traces of their grand common toil. Catching sight of me advancing towards him, he dismissed his men and came to meet me. It was then that the salutation rose spontaneously to my lips—

'Jesus of the Fields—Hosanna!'

For all forms of vegetable life he was full of infinite forethought. Nothing escaped his keen, all-observant eye. On our morning walks he would stop every few steps to brush away a snail, a caterpillar, an ant from the young leaves. One day I was heedlessly flicking the grass with my stick as

we went, and many a tender blade flew off at every stroke. Presently, he could bear it no longer and took the stick from my hand, but very gently and with a blush, imagining, no doubt, that his compassion for these things would seem to me but morbid sentimentality. Oh, that blush upon that manly face!

Another day, when I broke a bough of apple-blossom from a tree, I surprised a shadow of distress in Federico's eyes. I instantly desisted. 'If you would rather I did not——'

He broke into a loud, embarrassed laugh. 'No, no—not at all—strip the whole tree if you like.'

Meanwhile, the broken bough hung by a thread or or two of living fibre and swayed to and fro against the tree-trunk; and, in truth, the fracture, wet with sap, had all the appearance of a wound. The fragile blossoms—faintly red, faintly white, like sprays of wild rose, bearing in their bosom a germ destined now never to see the light, quivered incessantly in the breeze.

'It is for Giuliana,' I hastened to explain, as if to lessen the cruelty of my handiwork; and snapping the last remaining thread of fibre, I took possession of the broken bough.

CHAPTER IV

NOT this bough only but many another I brought to Giuliana. I always returned to La Badiola laden with floral offerings. One morning, when my arms were full of hawthorn, I met my mother in the hall. I was a little out of breath and heated with my exertions.

'Where is Giuliana?' I asked.

'Upstairs in her room,' she answered, laughing.

I bounded up the stairs, hurried along the corridor, and entered boldly into her room, calling: 'Giuliana, Giuliana!—where are you?'

The two little girls rushed gleefully to meet me, delighted at the sight of the flowers, dancing round me in irrepressible excitement.

'Come along!' they cried; 'mama is in here, in her bedroom—come along!'

And I crossed the threshold with much trepidation and found myself in Giuliana's presence, who stood smiling and confused.

I dropped the hawthorn at her feet. 'See what I have brought you.'

'Ah—how lovely!' she exclaimed, bending over the dewy and odorous treasure.

She was wearing one of her favourite loose and flowing gowns, of a dull green like the leaf of an aloe. Her hair was not dressed, only carelessly

fastened up in a great loose knot, covering her ears and the back of her neck in dense masses. The scent of the hawthorn, a mixture of thyme and bitter almond, rose up around her and diffused itself through the whole room.

'Take care you don't prick yourself,' I said. 'Look at my hands.' And I showed her the scratches which were still bleeding, as if thereby my offering was rendered more meritorious.

'Oh, if she would only touch my hands!' I thought to myself, and there passed vaguely through my mind the recollection of a day long ago when she had kissed my hands where the thorns had scratched them, and wanted to suck the drops of blood as they welled up one by one. 'If she only would take my hands in hers now, and into that sole action put all her pardon and all her generous self-surrender!'

In all these days I had been in continual expectation of some such moment. I really do not know whence I drew my faith, but I was certain that, sooner or later, Giuliana would give herself to me once more in a simple, silent action which would convey to me 'all her pardon and all her self-surrender.'

She smiled. A shade of suffering passed across her white face and sunken eyes.

'Don't you feel a little better since you have been here?' I asked her, coming closer to her.

'Yes, yes; much better,' she replied. Then, after a pause: 'And you?'

'Oh, I am completely well again. Can you not see it?'

'Yes; it is true.'

Whenever she spoke to me in those days it was with a singular hesitation which seemed to me then full of charm, but which now I am quite unable to define. She seemed perpetually occupied in repressing the words that rose to her lips and substituting others. Moreover, her voice had become, so to speak, more *feminine*, had lost some of its original firmness and ring; it sounded like an instrument that has been muffled. But, seeing that she was so gracious towards me in all her expressions, what hindered her from going further? What was it that kept up the barrier between us?

During this period, which will always remain a mysterious chapter to me in the story of my soul, my natural perspicacity seems to have utterly forsaken me. That terrible faculty for analysis, the very quality which had been the source of so much pain to me, seemed exhausted. Innumerable sensations, countless emotions of those days are now totally incomprehensible and inexplicable to me, for I have nothing to guide me in retracing their origin or determining their nature. There is a break of continuity, a defect of fusion between that period of my mental life and the rest.

I once heard a story of a young prince who, after long and adventurous wanderings, at last discovered the lady whom he had sought so ardently. The youth trembled with hope and expectation, while the lady smiled upon him where he stood quite near her. But a veil which she wore rendered the smiling lady intangible. It was a veil of unknown material, and so thin that it seemed to mingle with the air, and yet the prince was unable to clasp his beloved in his arms by reason of it.

This story helps me somewhat to illustrate my singular state of mind, at that time, with regard to Giuliana. I felt that something intangible, incomprehensible, still held us apart. But, nevertheless, I had full confidence in the 'simple, silent action' which should, sooner or later, rend the veil and make me happy.

Giuliana's room charmed me more than I can say! It was hung with some light-coloured material, not very new, and with a faded pattern of flowers on it, and had a deep alcove for the bed. How the hawthorns scented it!

She turned very pale. 'That scent is very strong—it quite goes to my head. Don't you feel it?' She went over to the window and opened it; then she turned to Maria: 'Go and call Miss Edith,' she added.

The governess appeared at once.

'Edith, will you please take these flowers into the music-room and put them in water. Take care not to scratch yourself.'

Maria and Natalia insisted on carrying part of the load, so we were left alone. She returned to the window and leaned against it, with her back to the light.

'Have you anything to do?' I asked. 'Would you like me to go away?'

'No, no—stay. Sit down. Tell me about your morning's walk. How far did you get?'

She spoke with nervous haste, and rested her elbows on the high window-sill which reached to her waist. Her face was turned towards me and seemed full of shadows, especially in the hollows of her eyes, but the sunlight caught her hair, putting a dim halo round her head and shining on her shoulders. One

foot, on which she leaned most of her weight, peeped out from under her dress, showing a little of a silk stocking and a gold-embroidered bedroom slipper. A bit of dazzling blue landscape was visible behind her head framed in the open window. Her whole figure in that attitude and that light breathed an extraordinarily seductive charm.

Then it was that suddenly, as in a lightning flash, I saw in her once more the woman of my early love, and my heart kindled with the recollection and the longing for her caresses.

I looked her full in the eyes as I answered her, and the longer I looked at her, the more disturbed I became; and doubtless she read as much in my face, for her own agitation was very apparent. 'Shall I be bold?' I thought with keen emotion; 'shall I go up to her and take her in my arms?' But the apparent ease which I tried to infuse into my remarks abandoned me; I grew confused; the struggle was becoming insupportable.

The voices of the children and Miss Edith reached us indistinctly from the other room.

I rose and went over to the window and stood beside Giuliana, on the point of leaning over her and at last pouring out those words I had so often rehearsed in my imaginary colloquies with her. But the fear of probable interruption withheld me. This was, maybe, not an opportune moment to choose; perhaps I should not have time to tell her all, to open my whole heart to her, to describe my inner life of the last few weeks, the mysterious convalescence of my soul, the reawakening of my tenderest thoughts, the renewal of my dearest dreams, the tenacity of my hopes, the depth of my sentiment. I was afraid I

should not have time to tell her all the little recent episodes, to make those little frank confessions, so sweet to the ear of the woman who loves, and more persuasive than any eloquence. I must succeed in convincing her of a great, and to her perhaps incredible, thing, seeing that she had so often been disappointed: must persuade her firmly that my return this time was no deception, but sincere, definite, necessitated by a vital desire of my whole being. She doubted me still, and in that doubt lay the reason for her continued reserve. The shadow of a cruel memory stood between us still. I must break down that barrier and then reunite our souls so closely that nothing could ever separate us again. But all this must come about at a favourable hour, in some quiet, hidden spot inhabited only by memory —at Villalilla.

Meanwhile we were silent, standing side by side in the embrasure of the window. The scent of the hawthorn was gone; from the next room came the indistinct murmuring of the children's voices.

Giuliana drooped her head; doubtless she too felt the delicious and perturbing silence weigh heavy upon her. The light breeze caught a loosened curl upon her forehead, and the fluttering of that soft dusky lock with its glints of tawny gold against her pure, pale brow made me faint and languish with desire.

At last, unable to withstand the temptation, and struggling between timidity and boldness, I put out my hand to replace the lock and my trembling fingers passed over her hair, touched her ear, her neck, but gently—so gently—the very lightest of caresses.

'What are you doing?' said Giuliana, starting violently and turning a frightened, bewildered gaze upon me, evidently more agitated even than I was myself.

She darted from the window; then, hearing me follow her, she made as if to flee from the room.

'Ah, why—why do you do that, Giuliana?' I cried, stopping short. But I added instantly: 'You are right—I am not worthy yet. Forgive me!'

At that moment the two bells of the chapel began to ring, and the little girls rushed into the room towards their mother, shouting with delight. One after the other, they hung upon her neck and covered her face with kisses. From their mother they came to me, and I lifted them up and kissed them.

The bells pealed on gaily; the whole place seemed filled with the clang of their bronze tongues. It was Holy Saturday, the Eve of the Resurrection.

CHAPTER V

ON the afternoon of that same Saturday a strange fit of depression came over me.

The post had just come in, and my brother and I were in the billiard-room taking a look at the papers.

I happened to come across the name of Filippo Arborio, and a sudden overmastering emotion thrilled through me, as even a slight shock may bring the sediment in a full vessel to the surface.

I remember that it was a misty afternoon lighted up by pale and watery gleams of sunshine. Outside, in front of the windows that opened on to the terrace, Giuliana and my mother, arm-in-arm, walked up and down conversing. Giuliana carried a book in her hand and moved wearily.

With the inconsequence of scenes in a dream, there arose in my mind certain fragments out of the past: Giuliana before her looking-glass on that morning in November; the group of tall white chrysanthemums; my emotion on hearing her sing the air from Orpheus; the words written on the fly-leaf of *The Secret*; the colour of Giuliana's dress; my self-communings at the window; Arborio's face streaming with perspiration; the scene in the dressing-room of the fencing-school. With the shuddering fear of one who suddenly finds him-

self leaning over the edge of an abyss, I thought: 'Shall I not be able to save myself, after all?'

Oppressed and nervous, feeling the necessity of being alone to examine myself and look my terror in the face, I excused myself to my brother and went to my own rooms.

My distress was largely mixed with angry annoyance. I was like a man who, in the full enjoyment of comfortable convalescence, the recuperative hope of perfect health, suddenly feels the stab of the old malady again, is reminded that he bears in his flesh an irradicable ill, and is forced to examine himself closely, to convince himself of the horrid truth.

In the curious oblivion in which the things of the past had been submerged, in that strange process which seemed to have blotted out an entire stratum of my inner consciousness, my suspicion of Giuliana —that hideous suspicion—had vanished utterly. My spirit was too sorely in need of the healing rest of illusion, of the power to believe, to hope. My mother's sainted hand upon Giuliana's hair had restored for me the halo about that head. By one of those emotional illusions so frequent in a period of weakness, seeing the two women breathing the same air in such sweet communion, they had both been illumined by the same white ray of purity.

And now, a little trivial incident, the mere mention of a name in a newspaper, the reawakening of a dark thought, were sufficient to convulse and appal me, to drag me to the edge of an abyss into which I dared not cast a resolute and searching glance because my dream of happiness hampered me and held me back. Thoughts flashed with lightning rapidity through my brain. 'It is possible that she is no longer pure—

Filippo Arborio or another—who can say! If you knew for certain of her fault, could you forgive her? Who speaks of fault?—of pardon? You have not the right to judge her; you have not the right to open your lips. Too often has she been silent; now it is your turn. And the happiness I was looking forward to? Was it your happiness, or that of both of you? Of both of us; for, assuredly, the mere shadow of her sadness would dim my every joy. And you take it for granted that you being satisfied, she will be satisfied too?—you with your past of continual licence, and she with hers of perpetual renunciation? The happiness you dream of rests entirely on the abolition of the past. In that case, supposing she has really been faithless, should you not draw a veil over her frailty as well as your own? If she is to forget, why should you not forget also? If you desire to become a new man, completely cut off from your past misdeeds, why not look upon her as another woman under the same conditions? But then, what of my Ideal—my Ideal? Happiness would only be possible to me as long as I recognised in Giuliana a creature absolutely superior, impeccable, worthy of all adoration; and she would find the greater part of her own happiness just in that inner consciousness of superiority and moral grandeur. I can subtract nothing either from my own past or from hers, because that particular happiness could not exist had my former iniquities not been, or without that invincible, almost superhuman, heroism on her part, before which my soul has ever bent the knee in homage. But how much in this dream of yours is pure egoism and how much lofty Ideal—do you know? Are you assured that you

deserve so high a prize? Thus your long years of error have led you not to sorrow and expiation but to a recompense——'

I shook myself, to break the train of argument. 'After all, what is it but an old suspicion—very vague at best—now revived by mere accident? I am giving substance to a shadow. In a day or two—after Easter—we will go to Villalilla; and there I shall find out—I shall *feel* the truth beyond the possibility of doubt. But that profound, unalterable melancholy in her eyes—is that not suspicious?—and that far-away look, that shadow of a constant thought upon her brow, the overwhelming fatigue revealed in certain of her attitudes, the nervous embarrassment which she is unable to suppress whenever you approach her?' Such ambiguous appearances as these might easily be explained in a favourable sense. However, overcome by a wave of pain, I rose and went to the window with an instinctive longing to absorb myself in the external aspect of things, and find here either some responsive echo of my state of mind or some enlightenment, some soothing balm.

The sky was piled with layer upon layer of fleecy cloud which the wind shook into broad soft folds. Some of these veil-like clouds would gradually detach themselves and sink towards the earth, brushing the tree-tops, and then, torn and ragged, would flutter along the ground and melt away. The undulating line of the hills stretched away indistinctly into the background, now broken, now gathering together again, like a landscape seen in a dream, unreal, illusory. A leaden shadow filled the valley which the river lit up with its sparkle. The winding

stream, glittering through that gulf of shadow under the slow dissolving clouds, attracted my gaze and had for me all the fascination of something symbolical; it seemed to bear in its bosom the mysterious significance of this vague and dream-like spectacle.

Little by little my pain grew less poignant, the stormy waters calmed down. 'Why desire so passionately after happiness if I am not worthy of it? Why build the whole structure of the future on a dream? Why cling with such blind faith to a right which has no existence? Probably every human being, at one time or another, comes to a point in life's journey where he has to choose which path he will walk in. You once found yourself at such a point. Recall the moment when that white and faithful hand which held love and indulgence, peace, dreams and oblivion, all things fair and all things good, was stretched tremulously towards you as in supreme surrender.'

Measureless regret filled my heart with tears. Leaning my elbows on the window-sill and my head in my hands, I followed the windings of the river through the valley of leaden shadows and stayed thus for some minutes, weighed down by the menace of some imminent chastisement, feeling that some nameless disaster was hanging over me.

Suddenly the sound of a piano reached me from the room below, and in a moment the oppression lifted and gave place to a confused turmoil, in which my dreams, my longings, my hopes, all my regrets, remorse, and terror mingled with inconceivable and suffocating rapidity.

I recognised the music: it was a *Song without Words* which Giuliana was particularly fond of, and Miss Edith often played—one of those veiled and

deeply significant melodies in which the Soul seems to turn to Life and ask, though in varying accents, ever the same question: 'Why hast thou disappointed my hopes?'

Yielding to a half-instinctive impulse, I hurried downstairs and through the corridor to the room from whence the playing proceeded. The door stood ajar; I slid in noiselessly and peered through the aperture between the curtains. Was Giuliana there? At first I could distinguish nothing, my eyes not having accustomed themselves to the change of light, but I was instantly aware of the scent of the hawthorn — that pungent mixture of thyme and bitter-almond. I looked again. The room was faintly illumined by the pale greenish light that filtered through the Venetian blinds. Miss Edith was alone at the piano, and went on with her music unconscious of my presence. The polished surface of the instrument gleamed in the half-dark, and the hawthorn boughs shone ghostly white. In that peaceful retreat, in the midst of the perfume exhaled by the blossom that brought back to my memory all my honest emotion of the morning and Giuliana's smile, the music seemed to convey a deeper sense of consolation than ever before.

Where could Giuliana be? Had she not come upstairs yet? Was she still out of doors? I withdrew softly, went downstairs and across the hall without meeting any one. I felt an invincible desire to find her, to see her again; I had the idea that the mere sight of her would be sufficient to restore my peace and confidence. As I came out on the terrace, I saw Giuliana sitting under the elms with Federico.

They both smiled at me, and Federico said when I

came up to them: 'We were just speaking about you. Giuliana thinks you will soon be tired of staying at La Badiola. How about our plans then?'

'No, Giuliana does *not know*,' I answered with an effort at my usual ease of manner. 'But you will see. I am, on the contrary, so thoroughly tired of Rome —*and all the rest of it*!'

I looked at Giuliana, and a wonderful change took place in my spirits; all the miserable things that had oppressed me up till this moment, sank to the bottom, grew dim, vanished and gave place to the healthy sentiment which the mere sight of her and my brother sufficed to call up in me. She was sitting with a rather listless droop of the shoulders, and on her knee lay a book which I recognised as one I had given her a day or two before: Tolstoi's *War and Peace*. She seemed to diffuse an atmosphere around her of sweetness and kindness, which awoke in me much the same sentiment as I should have felt had I seen Costanza grown to womanhood and sitting there under the old familiar trees at Federico's side.

The elms rained down their blossom at every breath of wind. It was one continuous slow descent, through the white light, of transparent, almost impalpable shreds which lingered in the air, hesitating, fluttering like butterfly wings of greenish gold. They fell all over Giuliana, on her knees, her shoulders; and, from time to time, she raised her hand to brush away some caught in the meshes of her hair.

'Ah, if Tullio will stay on at La Badiola,' Federico resumed, turning to her, 'we shall do great things. We shall promulgate new land laws, lay the foundations of a new agrarian constitution. You smile?

But you shall have a share in our work—we shall intrust you with the carrying out of two or three of the commandments of our Decalogue. You too must be a labourer in the vineyard. Apropos of which, Tullio, when are you going to begin your apprenticeship? Your hands are far too white. Oh, those scratches from the hawthorn don't count!'

He spoke gaily in that clear warm voice of his, which instantly conveyed such a sense of security and confidence to the hearer. He continued to dilate on his plans, old and new, for applying to present use the primitive Christian rules as to alimentary labour; his depth of thought and feeling was tempered by a cheery humour which acted like a veil of modesty drawn by himself between him and the wonder and admiration of those who listened to him. Everything in him was simple and frank and spontaneous. By his own unaided force of mind, illumined by inborn kindness of heart, this young man had acted intuitively for some years already on the social theory instilled into Leo Tolstoi by the moujik Timoteo Bondareff. At that time, he was quite unacquainted with *War and Peace*, the great book which had only just appeared in the West.

'Here is a book after your own heart,' I said, taking the volume from Giuliana's knee.

'Yes? You must let me have it and I will read it.'

'Do you like it?' I asked Giuliana.

'Yes, very much. It is pathetic and consoling at the same time. I quite love Maria Bolkonsky already, and Peter Besoukhow too.'

I sat down beside her on the garden seat. I was

not conscious of any definite thought, and yet my mind was watchful and meditative. There was a most evident contrast between the sentiment of the hour, of the surrounding objects, and the sentiment represented by Federico's discourses, this book, the names of the persons Giuliana said she loved. The sound of the piano reached us faintly and intermittently, increasing the melancholy of the hazy atmosphere and the drowsiness in the air.

Deaf to what the others were saying, absorbed in my own train of thought, I opened the book, turned over the pages here and there and ran my eye over the first few lines of each. I noticed that some of the leaves were turned down, and that several others bore a nail-mark down the margin. Then, curious and somewhat anxious, I began to read. In the scene between Besoukhow and the old stranger at the post-house at Torjok, many sentences were underlined:—

'Your spiritual vision is turned inward upon yourself. Ask yourself if you are satisfied with what you see. And this is the point you have reached with your intellect as sole guide to you! You are young, you are rich, you have brains. What have you done with all these gifts? Are you satisfied with yourself and the kind of life you lead?'

'No, I abhor it.'

'Well, if so, then change it, purify it; and in transforming yourself you will learn to understand wisdom. How have you passed your life hitherto? In orgies, in wanton extravagance and depravity; receiving all things and giving nothing in return. To what use have you put the good gifts of fortune? What have you done for your neighbour? Have you given one thought to your thousands of dependants? Have you helped them morally and materially?

No. You have profited by their labours to live a life of idleness and sin. Then you married—you took upon yourself the responsibility of acting as guide to a woman, and that a young one. And what followed? Instead of helping her to find the path of truth, you cast her into an abyss of falsehood and shame. . . .'

At this point, the insupportable oppression fell upon me once more and weighed me to the ground; and the blow was worse than anything I had suffered before, because the near presence of Giuliana increased my distress a hundredfold. The passage I have quoted was marked by a single line. Undoubtedly Giuliana, in marking it, was thinking of me and my transgressions. But did that last underlined sentence refer to me—to us? Had I cast her, had she fallen, into 'an abyss of falsehood and shame'?

I was afraid she and Federico would hear the beating of my heart.

Another page was turned down and was deeply scored in the margin: the one on the death of the Princess Lisa at Lissy-Gory:—

'The eyes of the dead were closed, but the small delicate face was not changed. And she seemed for ever to ask—What have you brought me to? Prince Andrea shed no tears, but his heart was rent at the thought that he was culpable of wrong-doing which was now irremediable and ineffaceable. The old prince came too, and kissed one of the slender waxen hands that lay crossed upon her breast. And to him also the poor wan little face seemed to say—What have you brought me to?'

That humble yet terrible question was like a sword-thrust in my heart. 'What have you brought

me to?' I kept my eyes fixed upon the page, not daring to look at Giuliana and yet burning to do so. I was afraid that she and Federico would hear the beating of my heart, and, turning to look at me, would discover my embarrassment. One single, rapid, side-long glance I cast at Giuliana, and her profile impressed me so much that I seemed to see it on the page before me, side by side with the 'poor little wan face' of the dead princess. It was a pensive profile, rendered more so by her fixed attention to my brother, whose voice seemed to reach me confusedly and out of the far distance. Her lips were tightly closed and drooped a little at the corners, betraying involuntarily an extreme weariness and sadness. 'What have you brought me to?' repeated the dead and the living woman, both without moving their lips. 'What have you brought me to?'

'What are you so intent upon, Tullio?' said Giuliana, suddenly turning to me; and, taking the book out of my hands, she closed it and laid it down upon her knee again with a certain nervous impatience. Then, without a pause, and as if to deprive her action of any special significance, she went on—

'Shall we go up to Miss Edith and have a little music? Listen—I think she is playing the *Funeral March for the death of a Hero.* You were always fond of that, Federico.'

We all three listened. Several chords reached us through the silence. She was right in her conjecture.

'Shall we go, then?' she said, rising as she spoke.

I was the last to move, so that I might have her in front of me. She did not trouble to shake from her dress the blossoms that had fallen on her from the

elms; they formed a thick carpet on the ground and continued to flutter down ceaselessly. She stood for a moment, with bent head, gazing at a little heap of blossoms she had scraped together with the point of her delicate shoe. I could not see her face. Was she intent only on that little idle act, or was she absorbed in some perplexing thought?

CHAPTER VI

THE next morning, among those who brought Easter offerings to La Badiola was Calisto, the old caretaker at Villalilla, with an enormous bunch of lilac—all dewy, fresh, and fragrant. He insisted on delivering it with his own hands to Giuliana, reminding her of the delightful days of our last visit there, and begging her to come again, if only for a few hours. The signora had seemed so well, in such good spirits there! Why not come again? The house had remained exactly as she left it—nothing was altered. The garden was more luxuriant than ever—the lilacs, a perfect forest! And all in full bloom just now. Surely the scent of them must reach as far as La Badiola in the evenings? The very house and garden were looking forward to being visited. All the old nests under the eaves were full of swallows. Out of respect for the signora's wishes, those nests had always been held sacred. But, really and truly, there were too many of them now. Every week he had to use a shovel and broom to the balconies and window-sills. And the noise in the early morning! But when would the signora come? Soon?

I looked at Giuliana. 'Shall we go on Tuesday?'

She hesitated a moment, burying her face in the

bouquet which was almost too large for her to hold. 'Very well,' she answered; 'if you like—on Tuesday.'

'Tuesday, then,' I said to the old man, with such a joyful ring in my voice that I was quite startled myself, so sudden and spontaneous was my rise of spirits. 'You may expect us in the forenoon. We shall bring our lunch with us, so you need not prepare anything; do you understand? Leave the house shut up. I will open the door myself, and the windows too, afterwards.'

A strange, quite unreasoning joy took possession of me, suggesting to me foolish, childish actions and words which I had the utmost difficulty in repressing. I would like to have thrown my arms round Calisto, to have stroked his beautiful white beard, and, taking his arm, to have talked to him about Villalilla and the dear days of the past—there, at once, under the broad Paschal sun. 'Here again I have before me a man who is simple-hearted and sincere and faithful,' I thought, looking at him. And once more I felt reassured, as if the affection of this old man were a talisman for me against an evil fate.

Once again, since the evening of the day before, my spirit arose encouraged by the joy that sparkled in every eye and that seemed to emanate from everything about me. La Badiola, that morning, seemed the goal of a very pilgrimage. Not a peasant in the round but brought some little gift and his good wishes. My mother received upon her sainted hands the kisses of innumerable men, women, and children. Mass in the chapel was attended by a dense crowd that overflowed on to the open space outside, worshipping under the blue dome of heaven. The silver bells rang sweetly through the

calm air. Round the sun-dial on the tower ran the inscription, *Hora est benefaciendi.* And in that morning glory, when all the gratitude owing for long-continued benefits seemed to stream towards the dear maternal house, those three words sang aloud.

How could I then preserve within my heart the perfidy of those doubts and suspicions, impure imaginings, and turbid memories? What need for fear after I had seen my mother press her lips more than once on Giuliana's brow—after I had seen my brother clasp in his strong and loyal hand the slim hand of her who was to him the reincarnation of Costanza?

CHAPTER VII

I COULD think of nothing during the next day and the day following but the excursion to Villalilla; never, I think, had I awaited the hour of my first appointment with a mistress with such overwhelming trepidation.

I looked upon the bitter anguish of the past Saturday as an evil dream. The stirring of my senses helped to obscure my mental vision and render me obtuse. I looked forward to reconquering not only Giuliana's soul but her body, and there was a strong element of the physical mingled with my mental excitement. The very name of Villalilla called up languorous memories—memories not only of tender idylls but of ardent passion. Unconsciously, perhaps, I had whetted the edge of my desire with the images inevitably born of my suspicions. Up till now, the spiritual element had predominated, and in picturing the great day I had confined myself entirely to imaginary colloquies with the woman whose pardon I sought to obtain. Now, it was not so much the pathetic scene I saw, as the scene of passion which should follow immediately upon it. Pardon would melt into surrender, the timid kiss upon the brow into the burning kiss upon the lips. The spirit would give place to the flesh.

Maria and Natalia had shown a great wish to accompany us on this expedition, and Giuliana would have consented. But this was not in my plan, and I used all my wit and all my persuasion to gain my own way.

Federico proposed that as he was obliged to go to Casal-Caldore on Tuesday, he would drive us as far as Villalilla, where he would drop us and go on. In the evening he would pick us up again, and we would all come back to La Badiola together. To this Giuliana and I agreed.

I reflected that Federico's company, at any rate on the way there, would not be unwelcome: it would relieve me of a certain awkwardness. What would Giuliana and I have had to talk about, if we had been alone, during the drive of two or three hours? What attitude could I possibly have adopted towards her? I should have run great risks of spoiling everything, or at least of taking off the first freshness from our emotions. Somehow I had always fancied finding myself suddenly with her in Villalilla, as if by magic, and of addressing my first tender and humble words to her there.

The presence of Federico would enable me to escape those preliminary hesitations, the long embarrassing silences, the remarks made in a low voice out of regard for the ears of the coachman—in a word, all the petty irritation and annoyances of such a situation. We would get out at Villalilla, and there, there alone, we should find ourselves at last side by side at the gates of our lost Paradise.

CHAPTER VIII

AND so it all turned out. It would be impossible to me to put into words what I felt when I heard the jangle of the gate bell and the wheels of the carriage rolling away into the distance, taking Federico on to Casal-Caldore. When Calisto appeared, I took the keys out of his hand with manifest impatience.

'You can go now,' I said. 'I will call you later on.' And I shut the gate again myself, leaving the old man somewhat astonished and not best pleased with this curt dismissal.

'So here we are at last!' I exclaimed when Giuliana and I were once more alone, and the happiness that flooded my whole being thrilled in my voice.

Oh, I was happy, happy—unspeakably happy. I was possessed, as it were, by some great hallucination of bliss unhoped for, unexpected, transfiguring my whole inner world, awakening and multiplying all there still remained to me of goodness and of youth, isolating me from the rest of my kind, and suddenly concentrating my whole life within the compass of the walls that bounded this garden. Wild words rose and died away on my lips, my very reason seemed bewildered by the lightning play of my thoughts.

How could Giuliana help divining what was going on in me? how could she help understanding? Surely the dazzling rays of my felicity must pierce to her very heart's core!

We looked at one another. To this day I can see the half-frightened expression on her face, and the wavering, uncertain smile that played about her lips.

'Let us take a turn round the garden before opening the house,' she said in that low veiled voice of hers and with the curious hesitation I had noticed once before, as if she were continually occupied in repressing the words that rose to her lips and substituting others. 'What an age it seems since I last saw it in full bloom like this! That was three years ago—do you remember? It was in April, too—in Easter week.'

She was, no doubt, trying hard to overcome her embarrassment, but she could not; to check the wave of tenderness that swept over her, but it was no use. She herself, by her very first words in that place, had been the first to call up memories of the happy past. She walked on a pace or two and then stopped, and our eyes met. An indefinable agitation, as of a violent struggle with things suppressed, passed across her dilated eyes.

'Giuliana!' I broke out, unable to restrain myself any longer, feeling a burst of impassioned and tender words surge up from the depths of my heart, seized with a wild desire to fling myself at her feet, to clasp her knees, to press the hem of her garment to my lips, to cover her hands with burning, endless kisses.

She signed to me with an imploring gesture to be still, and went on down the path, quickening her pace.

She was wearing a dress of pale grey, trimmed with braiding of a darker shade, and a grey felt hat, and her parasol was of grey silk dotted with little white leaves. I can see her now, the graceful figure

in its delicate sober colouring passing along between the luxuriant masses of the lilac bushes, which bent towards her laden with their sprays of white or violet blossom.

It wanted an hour yet to midday. The morning was warm—precociously so for the time of year—with downy puffs of cloud flecking the blue. The fragrant shrub which gave its name to the villa flourished everywhere, lording it over the whole garden and forming a dense thicket, broken here and there by bushes of yellow roses which clambered up the lilac stems, pushed themselves in between the branches to fall again in interwoven chains and garlands and festoons; at the foot of the bushes Florentine irises lifted their noble heads from among their dull green sword-like leaves. The three perfumes mingled and formed one deep harmony which I instantly recognised, for it had remained distinctly in the memory of those bygone days like three notes in a chord of music. No sound broke the silence but the cry of the swallows. The house was only just visible between the cypresses, and the swallows swarmed about it like bees round the hive.

Presently Giuliana slackened her pace. I was walking at her side, so close that now and then our elbows touched. She looked about her with quick observant glances as if she feared to miss something. Two or three times, I surprised a movement as of speech upon her lips—the outline of a word—but no sound came.

'What are you thinking about?' I asked her in a low tentative voice, like a lover.

'I was thinking that we ought never to have gone away from here.'

'That is true, Giuliana.'

The swallows drew together and sped past us, with a shrill cry, like winged arrows.

'How I have looked and longed for this day, Giuliana! Ah, you can never know how much——' I burst out at last, a prey to such overpowering emotion that my voice changed beyond recognition. 'Never—never in all my life have I felt anything to equal the anxiety that has devoured me since the day before yesterday, from the moment when you consented to come here. You remember the first time we met in secret on the terrace at Villa Oggèri and we exchanged our first kiss? I was mad for love of you—you remember it? Well, what I went through while waiting for you that evening was absolutely nothing compared to this. . . . You do not believe me—you have every excuse for disbelieving, for mistrusting me—but I want to tell you all, I want to tell you how much I have suffered and feared, all I have hoped. Oh, I know—my sufferings are of little account compared to what I have made you endure. I know that—I know that. No trouble of mine can equal yours, can outweigh the tears you have shed. I have not expiated my sin, I am not worthy to be pardoned. But tell me—you must tell me what I can do to win your pardon! You do not believe me—but listen—let me tell you all. I have never truly loved any one but you in all my life—I love but you alone. Yes, I know—these are things that men always say to gain a woman's forgiveness; you have every excuse for not believing me. But still, if you will only think of the love that used to be, of those first three years of unbroken fondness—if you will look back, if you will

remember, it is impossible that you should not believe me. Even when I had fallen deepest I could not forget you, my spirit always turned to you, always sought for you and regretted the loss of you—always, do you hear?—always. Did you not know it? Sometimes, when you were only a sister to me, did you not see that I was well-nigh dying of sadness? This I swear, that away from you I have never tasted true happiness, have never had one hour of real peace—never, never, I swear it. You were my one unwavering, deep and secret adoration. The part of me that is best has always belonged to you; and one hope has always burned on in me: the hope of being able to cast off the bondage of my sin and to return and find my first and only love unaltered. . . . Ah, tell me that I have not hoped in vain, Giuliana!'

She was walking very slowly now, no longer looking about her, her head drooping, her face extremely pale. A little pained contraction appeared from time to time at the corner of her mouth. She was silent, and so a vague uneasiness began to stir in me. A dim sense of oppression seemed gradually to weigh upon me, coming from the sunshine, the flowers, the shrill cry of the swallows, the all-pervading laughter of the triumphant Spring.

'You do not answer,' I went on, taking the hand that hung loosely at her side. 'You do not believe me; you have lost all faith in me; you are afraid that I shall delude you again; you will not venture to give yourself to me again because of *that time.* Yes, it is true; that was the grossest cruelty I ever committed. I have it on my conscience like a crime, and even if you forgave me, I could never forgive myself. But did you not see that I was ill, that I

was mad? I was pursued by a curse. And, from that day onwards, I never had a moment's rest, never one lucid interval. Do you not remember? I am sure you knew that I was beside myself—was out of my mind—for you looked at me as one looks at an insane person. More than once, I caught a look of pained compassion in your eyes, a mixture of curiosity and fear. You remember to what a state I was reduced—unrecognisable. Very well then, now I am cured—I am saved—and by you. At last, light has come into the darkness. I have loved and still love only you—do you hear?'

I pronounced the last words in a firmer voice and more slowly, as if to impress them one by one upon her heart, and I pressed the hand I held in mine more warmly. She stopped short, breathing fast, and swayed as if she were about to fall. Later on—only later on, in the days that followed, did I understand all the mortal anguish that found vent in that panting breath. But at that moment my only thought was: 'In calling up the memory of my horrible treachery, I have revived her pain—I have touched a wound that is still open. Ah, how shall I persuade her to believe me? If I could only conquer her distrust! Why does she not hear the ring of truth in my voice?'

We were close to a spot where several paths met. There was a seat there. 'Let us sit down a moment,' she murmured.

We sat down. I do not know if she recognised the spot at once. I did not, for the first moment: my eyes were dazed as if I had been wearing a bandage over them for a long time. We both looked about us, then we turned to one another, and

the self-same thought was in our eyes. Many a fond memory clung round that old stone seat. My heart did not swell with regret for the past, but with a furious thirst for life which showed me, as in a flash, a fantastic and delusive vision of the future. 'Ah, she does not know what new proofs of tenderness I am capable of! There is a very Paradise waiting for her in my soul!' And the ideality of love flamed up so high within me that it seemed to take away my breath.

'You grieve over it—but what woman in all the world has ever been loved as you are loved? What woman has ever had such a proof of love as I am giving you? As you said just now—we ought never to have gone away from here, and perhaps we should have been happy. You would not have suffered martyrdom, you would not have shed so many tears, would not have lost so much of life; but you would not have known all the full force of my love.'

Her head was sunk upon her breast, her eyes half-closed. She listened, motionless. Her lashes cast a shadow along the top of her cheeks that thrilled me more than a glance.

'I myself—I did not know the love I was capable of. That first time that I left you, I thought that all was over between us for ever. I sought some other passion, other intoxication. I wanted to clasp the whole of life in my arms with one embrace. You were not enough for me. And for years I wore myself out in frightful labour, so frightful that I look back upon it with horror such as the galley-slave feels for the ship on which he has lived—*dying daily inch by inch.* And I have had to pass from one darkness to another, for years, before this light rose

upon my soul, before this great truth was revealed to me. I have never loved but one woman—you. You alone, of all the world, are good and kind. You are the sweetest, the tenderest creature I have ever dreamed of—the One and Only. And you were there in my house all the time I was searching for you far away. Do you hear? do you understand me? *You were at my side while I sought you far away*. Ah, tell me—is this revelation not worth all your tears? Would you not have shed more, even more, for the sake of having such a proof?'

'Yes, even more,' she answered, so low that I scarcely caught the words.

It was not more than a breath from her blanched lips. The tears welled up between her lids, trickled over her cheeks, and dropped upon her heaving bosom.

'Giuliana, my love, my love!' I cried with a thrill of supremest rapture, and threw myself on my knees before her.

I clasped my arms about her and laid my head in her lap, feeling through my whole frame that fierce tension which is ever the result of the vain effort to express the ineffable passion of the soul by a single action, a gesture, a caress. Her tears fell upon my cheek. If the outward effect of those warm drops had in any way corresponded to their action on my emotions, they must have left indelible traces on my skin.

'Oh, let me drink them!' I entreated. And raising myself I pressed my lips upon her lids and bathed them in her tears, while my trembling fingers touched her caressingly. A strange, dreamy sense came over me—a feeling as if my solid flesh were

melting into air and I could surround, could entirely envelope, the beloved form I held in my arms.

'Did you ever dream,' I said—and the salt taste of her tears upon my lips touched me to the heart's core (later on, in the days that followed, I was amazed not to have discovered an intolerable bitterness in those tears)—'did you ever dream you would be so beloved? Did you ever imagine such bliss? It is I—look at me—it is I who am saying this to you. If you only knew how strange it all seems to me! If I could tell you all! I know that I knew you before, that I loved you before this hour; I know that I have found you *once more.* And yet I feel as if I had only *found you* now, for the first time, a moment ago when you said: "Yes—even more." You did say that, did you not? Only three words—a breath—and yet they bring new life to me, new life to you, and we are happy—happy to the end of time.'

I said all this to her in far-away, broken, indefinable tones; in a voice that seemed to reach the lips not by the agency of the material organs but by some subtle instrumentality of the soul.

Up till this moment, she had wept silently; now she broke into violent sobbing—not the sobs of one who is overpowered by a joy without limit, but of one who gives way to an inconsolable despair. She sobbed so violently that I remained for some moments in that state of stupefaction which any great outburst, any paroxysm of human emotion, always produces in the beholders. Unconsciously I drew away from her a little; and then suddenly I was aware that a gulf had opened between us—instantly I knew that not only had our physical

contact ceased, but that the sense of spiritual communion had vanished into thin air. Once more we were two distinct beings, separated, estranged from one another. The very difference in our attitudes increased the distance between us. Sunk into herself, pressing her handkerchief over her mouth with both hands, she sobbed and sobbed; and each sob shook her from head to foot as if it must rend her fragile form. I was still on my knees before her, but I did not touch her; I was gazing at her, stupidly and yet strangely lucid; intent on watching what was going on in my own mind, and yet all my senses alive to what was happening around me. I heard her weeping and the cries of the swallows; I had a perfectly exact perception of time and place. And all these flowers and their fragrance, the sunshine spreading wide in the motionless air, all this frank laughter of the joyous Spring, filled me with bewilderment and terror, which grew and grew till it became a kind of panic, a blind instinctive horror, against which reason fought in vain. And as the lightning bursts from the black bank of cloud, so a thought flashed from the heart of my dark fear, illuminating me as it struck me: 'She is impure.'

Ah, why did the bolt not fall then and shatter me? Why did not my heart break then and there and stretch me lifeless on the ground at the feet of the woman who, in the space of a few short moments, had lifted me to the summit of happiness and then hurled me into an abyss of despair?

'Answer me,' I cried—seizing her wrists and forcing her to uncover her face while I advanced my own quite close to her, and my voice sounded so dull and muffled that I scarcely heard it myself for the roaring

in my ears—'Answer me: what is the meaning of such tears as these?'

She checked her sobs and looked at me, and her eyes, though swollen with weeping, dilated with an expression of extreme apprehension, as if she expected to see me die the next moment. In truth, every vestige of colour had left my face.

'*It is too late—is it, perhaps, too late?*' I added, revealing my dreadful thought in that obscure question.

'No, no, no. . . . Tullio, it is—nothing. Could you think——! No, no—I am so weak—see! I am not what I used to be. I cannot control myself. I am ill, you know, I am so ill! I could not help breaking down—at what you said. You understand me, surely. It came over me quite suddenly. It is only my nerves—just a bad fit of crying; I really hardly know whether I was crying for joy or pain. Ah, mio Dio! There, it is going over. Get up, Tullio; come and sit here beside me.'

Her voice was still hoarse with weeping, and a quick sob broke from her now and then; she looked at me with an expression I recognised, one that I had seen on her face before at the sight of any suffering of mine. There was a time when she could not bear to see me suffer. Her sensitiveness on that subject was so exaggerated that I could obtain anything from her by pretending that I was in pain. There was nothing in the world she would not have done to spare me the smallest pang. Often I have simulated illness, just for fun, to tease her, to make her comfort me like a child, to receive from her certain caresses I particularly enjoyed, to excite in her certain graces I adored. And here was the very same tenderly anxious look in her eyes.

'Come and sit down—here, beside me. Or would you rather we went on through the garden? We have scarcely seen anything yet. Supposing we go over to the fish-pond. I should like to bathe my eyes. Why do you look at me like that? What are you thinking about? Are we not happy? There now—see—I am beginning to feel ever so much better—ever so much better. I must go and bathe my eyes—my face. I wonder what time it is? Twelve? Federico will be back about seven. We have plenty of time. Shall we go?'

She spoke brokenly, a little spasmodically, with an obvious effort to compose herself, to regain the mastery over her nerves, to dissipate the cloud from my mind and make me think she was confident and happy. The timid, pathetic smile in her still wet and reddened eyes melted me. There was the same pathetic gentleness in her voice, her attitude, her whole person, and it softened me and threw a spell of languor over my senses. It is impossible to define the delicate seduction that emanated from her and enthralled me, body and soul, in the irresolute and confused state I was then in. She seemed to plead mutely: 'I could not be more sweet and yielding. Take me then, as you love me—take me in your arms, but very gently, do not hurt me, do not clasp me too roughly. Oh, how I hunger for your caresses! But I think I could easily die of them.' Thus I can render to some slight degree the effect produced upon me by that smile. Then she rose, and with a rapid movement I clasped my arms about her, and my lips clung to hers.

It was a lover's kiss—a long, long kiss that set the very essence of our two lives quivering. She sank

down upon the seat again, exhausted. 'Ah, no, no, Tullio—I implore you! No more—I can bear no more! Let me get back a little strength!' she entreated, stretching out her hands to keep me back. 'Otherwise I shall never be able to get up from here. See, I am half dead.'

But an extraordinary change had come over me, as when the impetuous spring-tide rushes up the shore carrying everything away with it, and leaving the bare white sand behind. There was a sudden sweeping away of all that had been before, and as suddenly a new condition of things was established under the immediate influence of the circumstances, under the impulse of rekindled passion. I was conscious only of this: the woman I loved was there, before me, trembling, prostrated by my kiss—mine, all mine, at last; and around us bloomed a solitary garden, full of secret memories; and close by, just beyond the blossoming trees, a silent house awaited us watched over by the guardian swallows.

'Do you think I should not be able to carry you?' I said, lifting her hands and interlacing her fingers in mine. 'Why, you used to be as light as a feather, and you must be lighter than ever now. Shall we try?'

Something obscure passed in her eyes. For an instant she seemed to retire into herself like a person who considers and makes a rapid resolve. Then she shook her head, and, leaning back, she stretched her arms out to me.

'Very well,' she said, laughing, 'pull me up.'

When I did so, she fell upon my breast, and this time it was she who kissed me first, with a sort of fury, as if she were trying to quench at a single

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draught the maddening pangs of long-sustained thirst.

'Oh, I am dead!' she cried, when at last she wrenched her lips from mine. And truly that dewy mouth, the feverishly red lips a little swollen and falling apart in languorous curves in that pallid, wasted face, gave me an indefinable impression of the one thing left alive in a dead countenance.

'Are you happy now?' she whispered dreamily, with uplifted face, while the long lashes quivered as though a wan smile were struggling from under her closed lids.

I pressed her to my heart.

'Let us go, then; take me where you will. But you must support me a little, Tullio—my knees are giving way beneath me.'

'Shall we go to our house, Giuliana?'

'Wherever you like.'

I passed an arm firmly round her waist and led her along. She moved like a somnambulist. For a little while we walked in silence, turning now and then at the same moment to look at one another. She certainly seemed to me quite new and strange. A trifle sufficed to attract my attention and occupy my thoughts: a tiny mole scarcely visible on her skin, a little dimple near her lower lip, the curve of her eyelashes, a vein on her temple, the shadow round her eyes, her infinitely delicate ear. The brown beauty-spot on her neck was half hidden by the lace about her throat, but with certain movements of her head it would appear and then disappear again, the little incident exciting my impatience. I was dazed with excitement, and yet my senses were strangely alert. I heard the cries

of the swallows and the splash of the fountain in the pond close by. I felt that life and time were fleeing; and for the third time that day the sunlight, the flowers, the fragrance, all the riotous laughter of triumphant Spring, weighed upon me with an inexplicable heaviness.

'Look, my willow-tree!' exclaimed Giuliana as we drew near the pond. And ceasing to lean upon me, she hastened her steps. 'Just look how it has grown! Do you remember, it was only a little shoot?' She was pensively silent for a moment, and then added in a different tone and a low voice: 'I have seen it since; you do not know, perhaps, that I came to Villalilla *that time*.'

She could not restrain a sigh; but immediately afterwards, as if to dissipate the shadow she had raised between us by her words, as if to take the bitter taste of them out of her mouth, she stooped, and, putting her mouth to one of the pipes of the fountain, she drank a little water and then lifted her face for me to kiss. Her lips and chin were all wet and fresh. When at last we drew apart, the eyes of each repeated the same tale of rapture. The sentiment expressed in Giuliana's face was quite extraordinary, and, at that time, incomprehensible to me. But later on, I understood it; when I came to know that the poor creature was intoxicated by a mingled thought of death and of passion, and that as she abandoned herself to the languor of her senses she made her death-vow. I can see her as clearly as if she stood before me; I shall always see that mysterious face, overshadowed by the long streaming tresses of the willow. The flashes of sunlight on the water pierced the strands of diaphanous foliage and quivered and

danced in the shadow. The echo mingled the various voices of the noisy water-jets into one deep monotonous sound. Everything around me went to increase my nervous exaltation.

We moved towards the house in silence. So intense were my sensations, my heart beat so violently, that I thought to myself, 'Is this delirium? I felt nothing like this even on my bridal night.' Her agitation, too, must have become almost insupportable, for she stopped.

'Oh, mio Dio! mio Dio!' she gasped, 'this is too much!'

Breathless, half-choking, she took one of my hands and laid it on her heart. 'Feel that.'

I could feel the violent throbbing of her heart through her dress, I saw her eyes swim beneath the drooping lids, and fearing that she was going to faint, I put my arm round her and almost carried her as far as the cypresses, where we both sank on a seat exhausted.

Before us the house rose up as in a dream.

She leaned her head upon my shoulder. 'Oh, Tullio, this is terrible! Don't you think we may die of it?' Then she added sombrely, in a voice coming from who knows what depths of her soul: 'Would you like us to die together?'

The curious thrill that shot through me at these words revealed to me that they were dictated by some profound and extraordinary emotion, doubtless the same which had transfigured Giuliana's face under the willow after our kiss. But again I did not understand. All I grasped was that we were both possessed by a kind of delirium, and breathed in an atmosphere of dreams.

The house rose up before us as in a dream. Under the rustic porch, on every cornice, every projection, along the rain-pipes, under the window-ledges and the balconies, in every crevice and corner, the swallows had built their nests. The clay nests, old and new, placed closely together like the cells of a bee-hive, left very little space free. Although closed and uninhabited, the house had nothing dead about it. It was animated by restless, blithe, and tender life. The faithful swallows surrounded it with their swift flight, their cries, all their grace and all their love. While groups of them chased each other in the air, with the swiftness of arrows, scattering and rejoining in an instant, grazing the tops of the trees, rising towards the sun, indefatigable, other work was going on in and around the nests. Of the mother swallows, some would remain for an instant clinging to the orifice of the nest, others hung poised upon their gleaming wings; others again would slip half-way inside leaving their little quivering forked tails outside, showing up sharply black and white against the yellow clay; some, who were inside, came half-way out, showing a little of their lustrous breasts and tawny throats; while some, invisible till then, darted off in full flight with a shrill startling cry. All this blithe and joyous movement about the closed house, all this nest-life surrounding our early nest, was so pretty a spectacle, so delicate and touching a miracle to us, that we sat for some minutes watching it, our fever and excitement forgotten.

I was the first to break the spell.

'Here is the key,' I said, rising. 'What are we waiting for?'

'No, Tullio; wait a little longer!' she entreated timidly.

'Well, I will go on and open the door'; and I went towards the house, mounting the three steps as if they led to an altar. Just as I was in the act of turning the key with the tremor of the devotee who opens a reliquary, I heard Giuliana behind me; she had followed me furtively, light as a shadow. I started.

'Is that you?'

'Yes, it is I,' she whispered caressingly, and I felt her breath upon my cheek; and standing at my side, she wound her arms about my neck so that her slender wrists were crossed beneath my chin.

The furtive action, the quiver of laughter in her voice, betraying her childish delight at having taken me by surprise, this form of embrace, all these agile graces, reminded me of the Giuliana of old, the youthful and fond companion of happy years, the fascinating creature of the long hanging plait, the fresh laughter, the girlish airs. A breath of that happiness surrounded me now on the threshold of the well-remembered house.

'Shall I open?' I asked, with my hand still upon the key.

'Yes, open,' she answered without releasing me, and with her lips almost upon my ear.

At the grating of the key as it turned in the lock, she clasped me tighter, and, nestling closely to me, communicated her thrill to me. The swallows circled screaming round our heads, and yet that grating of the key was as distinct as if there had been profound silence.

'Go in,' she whispered; 'go in, go in.'

That voice, from lips so near and yet invisible, human and yet so mysterious, breathed into my ear, and, penetrating to my heart's core, womanly and

sweet as no other voice ever was before—I hear it still, I shall hear it always.

'Go in, go in.'

I threw the door wide, and we passed over the threshold as if we had been one person.

The hall was lighted by a round window high up over the door. A swallow flew over our heads with a sharp cry. Looking up in surprise, we saw a nest hanging from a niche under the arch. A pane was missing in the window. The swallow flew out through the opening.

'Now I am yours, yours, yours!' said Giuliana, still in a whisper; and without loosening her clasp she slid round so that she lay upon my breast, and lifted her face to mine.

We exchanged a long kiss.

'Come,' I said at last, 'come upstairs. Shall I carry you?' And though my senses were reeling, I felt my muscles were strong enough to have carried her up the stairs at a bound.

'No,' she replied, 'I can go by myself.' But to hear her and look at her, it did not seem likely that she could.

I put an arm round her, as I had done in the garden, and supported her step by step. The whole house seemed full of that deep, far-away hum one hears in certain hollow shells. No other sound, no evidence of the external world reached us.

Arrived at the upper floor, I did not open the door in front of us, but turned to the right down a dark passage, drawing her along with me by the hand, without speaking. Her breath came in such quick gasps that it pained me to hear her, and infected me with her agitation.

'Where are we going?' she panted.

'To *our* room,' I answered.

It was almost too dark to see the way, but my instinct guided me. I found the handle of the door; I opened it. We entered.

CHAPTER IX

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. About three hours had passed since our arrival at Villalilla. I had left Giuliana alone for a moment in order to call Calisto. The old man had brought the luncheon tray once already, and received, without surprise and with a certain good-natured twinkle of amusement, a second prompt dismissal.

And now, Giuliana and I were sitting at a table opposite to one another, like two lovers, smiling into one another's eyes. There were various cold viands on the table—preserves, biscuits, oranges, and a bottle of Chablis. The room, with its baroque ceiling, its light wall-hangings, and its pastoral pictures over the doors, had a certain quaint, old-fashioned gaiety about it, a last-century air. Through the open balcony door streamed a softened light, for the sky was veined with long milk-white clouds, and framed in the square, we could see 'the old and venerable cypress which had at its foot a bank of roses, and round its head a chorus of twittering sparrows.' Farther off stretched the forest of delicately tinted bloom, the glory of Villalilla. The triple perfume, Villalilla's April soul, spread through the quiet air in long regular breaths.

'Do you remember——?' Giuliana was saying.

And again, and again: 'Do you remember?'

The most distant memories of our love rose one by one to her lips, evoked, it might be, by some trifling circumstance, but reviving with extraordinary intensity here in the place of their birth and among the old familiar surroundings. But the same desperate longing, the same furious thirst of life which had come over me down in the garden, now made me almost impatient of these reminiscences, and suggested to me hyperbolical visions of the future to set against the haunting phantasms of the near past.

'We ought to come back here to-morrow, or in two or three days at furthest, to stay—but by ourselves. You see, there is nothing missing, nothing has been taken away. If you like, we might stay on here to-night. But you do not want to! Is it really true that you would rather not?'

With voice and gesture and look I sought to tempt her. Our knees touched under the table. But she only gazed fixedly at me and did not answer.

'Imagine our *first evening* here at Villalilla!—to go out and stay out of doors till after the Ave Maria and watch the windows lighting up! Ah, you know what I mean: the lights that are kindled in a house for the first time—*the first evening*! Think of it! Up till now, you have done nothing but remember, remember. And yet, not one of your recollections is equal to a single moment of this day to me, will not be worth one moment of to-morrow. Have you any doubts as to the happiness that lies before us? I have never loved you as I love you now, Giuliana—never, never. Do you hear? I have never been so wholly yours as I am to-day, Giuliana. I will tell

you—I will tell you of all I have gone through, so that you may understand the miracles you have wrought. After so many vile things, how could I hope for anything like this? I will tell you all. At certain moments, I felt as if I had returned to the days of my adolescence, the days of my boyhood. I felt pure and untainted as then, and affectionate and simple-hearted. I remembered nothing of the past. All—all my thoughts belonged to you, my every emotion was connected with you. There were times when the sight of a flower, of a little leaf, sufficed to make the cup of my soul run over, it was so full. And you knew nothing of all this, you noticed nothing. I have so much to tell you. The other day, on Saturday, when I came into your room with the hawthorn, I was as timid and bashful as a young lover, and yet I was dying to take you in my arms. Did you not notice it? Oh, I must tell you all—I will make you laugh! You don't know all. Once or twice, I have stolen secretly into your room with a wildly beating heart; I have drawn aside the curtains of the alcove to look at your bed, to touch it, to bury my face in the pillows. And now and then, when the whole house was asleep, I have crept softly, softly to your door and fancied I could hear you breathe——'

'Hush, Tullio, hush,' she broke in in supplication as if my words hurt her. Then she hastened to add, with a smile: 'You know, you must not work upon me so—I told you that before. I am so feeble—such a poor, weak creature. You make me lose my head. I shall not be able to control myself. See how dreadfully pulled down I am.'

She smiled a faint wan smile. Her eyelids were

still slightly reddened and heavy, but under them her eyes burned with a feverish ardour and gazed at me continually with an intensity that was almost intolerable in spite of the softening shadow of her long lashes. In her whole attitude and manner there was something unnatural, though what it precisely was I could not grasp. When had her face ever assumed that character of disquieting mystery? And, from time to time, her expression seemed to grow complicated, obscure, till it was enigmatical. 'Her whole mind is in a whirl,' I thought to myself. 'She does not yet grasp what has happened. Her inner world must be upheaved. One's whole existence cannot change in a moment.' This mysterious expression attracted me and increased my passion more and more. Her burning gaze entered my very marrow like a devouring fire.

'You are not eating anything,' I said to her, making an effort to dissipate the fumes of passion that were rising to my head.

'Neither are you.'

'Well, drink a little at least. Do you recognise this wine?'

'Oh, I recognise it!'

'You remember?'

We look each other in the eyes, agitated by the calling up of a love episode over which floated the delicate aroma of the pale golden wine which she particularly affected.

'Then let us drink together—to our happiness!'

We clinked glasses, and I emptied mine at a draught; but she merely touched it with her lips as if seized with a sudden invincible repugnance.

'Well?'

'I can't, Tullio.'

'Why not?'

'I can't—please don't force me. I believe that even one drop would upset me.' And a deathly pallor overspread her face.

'Do you feel ill, Giuliana?'

'A little. Let us move from here—let us go out on to the balcony.'

I put my arm round her. 'Would you like to lie down and rest? I would stay beside you.'

'No, thanks, Tullio; I feel better now.'

We walked to the end of the balcony opposite the cypress, and she leaned on the iron railing with one hand on my shoulder. From a projection just under the roof hung a group of nests, among which the swallows kept up a ceaseless bustle. But the calm of the garden below was so profound, the cypress stood so motionless before us, that all this turmoil, this flurry of wings, these cries, annoyed and displeased me. Everything else was quieting down and growing dim in the still light, and I felt that I wanted a pause, a long interval of silence and composure, in order to drink in all the sweetness of that hour and that solitude.

'I wonder if there are any nightingales here now?' I said, remembering the poignant sweetness of their evening songs.

'Very likely. There is no saying.'

'They begin singing towards evening. Would you not like to hear them again?'

'But when will Federico come back for us?'

'Not till very late, I hope.'

'Oh, yes—let it be late, late!' she exclaimed with such sincere warmth that I thrilled with joy.

'Are you happy?' I asked, seeking her answer in her eyes.

'Yes, I am happy,' she replied, dropping her lids.

'Are you sure now that I love you alone—that I am yours, all yours, for ever?'

'Yes, I am sure.'

'And you—how much do you love me?'

'More than you will ever know, poor Tullio!'

As she spoke, she drew away from the railing and leaned upon my breast with one of those indescribable movements of hers in which is contained all the sweetest abandon a woman can show towards a man.

'*Bella! Bella!*'

How beautiful she looked! So languishing, so yielding, so meltingly tender! Her face rose, luminously pale, out of the dusky flood of her loosened hair. Her lashes cast a shadow on her cheeks that intoxicated me more than a glance.

'You, too—you can never know. If I were to tell you all the mad thoughts that have sprung up in me! My happiness is so great that it frightens me. I almost feel that I should like to die.'

'Die!' she repeated softly with a faint smile. 'Who knows, Tullio? Perhaps I may die—soon.'

'Oh, Giuliana!'

She straightened herself up to look in my face. 'Tell me,' she went on, 'what would you do if I were to die—quite suddenly—unexpectedly?'

'Foolish child!'

'If, for instance, I were dead to-morrow.'

'Don't say such things!'

I took her face between my hands, and began covering her lips, her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead, her hair, with light and rapid kisses. She made no

resistance; indeed, whenever I stopped, she murmured, 'Go on.'

'To-morrow, to-morrow we must come back—not later than that,' I said, burning with impatience, feeling I know not what incitement come to me from the surrounding objects. 'We must sleep here to-morrow night. You would like that, would you not?'

'To-morrow!'

'We will begin life all over again—in this house, in this garden, in the middle of all this spring sunshine—begin our love again as if nothing had happened; come back, one by one, to the old caresses and find in each a new savour such as we have never known before; we have time—all time before us——'

'No, no, Tullio; do not speak of the future! Don't you know that it is unlucky? To-day, to-day—think of to-day, of the passing moment——' And she clung to me wildly, closing my mouth with frenzied kisses.

CHAPTER X

'SURELY I hear the horses' bells,' said Giuliana, rising. 'Federico has come.'

We both listened, but she was mistaken.

'Is it not time for him to be here?' she asked.

'Yes, it is almost seven o'clock.'

'Oh, mio Dio!'

We listened again. There was no sound to indicate the approach of the carriage.

'You had better go and look, Tullio.'

I left the room and went downstairs, walking a little unsteadily, for there was a mist before my eyes, and my brain seemed obscured by a kind of vapour. Opening the little side-door in the wall, I called to Calisto whose house was quite close by. I asked him about the carriage, but it was not in sight.

The old man would have liked to detain me in conversation.

'Do you know, Calisto, that we are probably coming back here to-morrow to stay?'

He threw up his hands in delight.

'Really?'

'Yes, really. Then we shall have plenty of time for talking. When you see the carriage, come and tell me. Addio, Calisto.'

I left him and returned to the house. Evening was falling and the swallows had increased their

clamour, groups of them cleaving the sunlit air with a flash and glitter of wings.

'Well?' asked Giuliana, turning round from the looking-glass in the act of putting on her hat.

'No sign of it.'

'Look at me—am I too untidy?'

'No.'

'But what a face! Just look at me.'

In truth, to look at her, she might just have risen from her coffin. Great violet rings encircled her eyes.

'And yet I am alive,' she added, and she tried to smile.

'Do you feel very bad?'

'No, Tullio. And still—I don't know what it is—I feel quite hollow; as if my head were empty, my heart empty, my veins empty. I have given you all, you see. I have left nothing for myself but the mere appearance of life.'

She smiled strangely as she spoke; a smile so shadowy and sibylline that it aroused an indefinable disquietude within me. But I was too dazed with rapture; the wheels of my mind seemed clogged, my intelligence blurred. No sinister suspicion entered my head. And yet I looked at her attentively, with anxious scrutiny, without knowing exactly why.

She turned again to the glass and put on her hat; then she went over to the table and took up her bracelet and gloves.

'I am ready,' she said.

She looked about her, apparently searching for something. 'I had a parasol, had I not?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Ah—now I remember. I must have left it down in the garden on the seat.'

'Shall we go and look for it?'

'I am too tired.'

'Then I will go alone.'

'No; send Calisto.'

'I will go. I will gather some sprays of lilac for you, and a bunch of musk-roses—shall I?'

'No—never mind the flowers——'

'Come over here and sit down, in the meantime. Perhaps Federico has been detained longer than he expected.'

I put an easy-chair out on the balcony for her, and she sank into it.

'As you are going down,' she said, 'will you see if Calisto has my cloak? I don't think it was left behind in the carriage. I feel rather cold.' She shivered.

'Shall I close the balcony doors?'

'No, no; let me look at the garden as long as I can. How beautiful it is at this hour! Look, is it not lovely?'

Gleams of gold lit up the garden vaguely here and there. The tops of the flowering lilac-trees were mostly of an intense violet, while the lower sprays inclined to greyish blue, and as the whole dense mass rippled gently in the breeze, it had all the changing effect of shot-silk. Weeping willows dipped their long tresses in the pond; the water glistened with the iridescent polish of mother-o'-pearl; and the motionless gleam, the trailing foliage, and forest of delicately tinted flowers in that last hour of the dying day, went to make up a vision of witchery and enchantment wholly unreal.

We both remained silent for some moments in the ban of that enchantment. An unreasoning melan-

choly invaded my soul—the obscure sense of unhappiness, which is latent at the bottom of every human love, stirred within me. My physical weariness, the torpor of my senses, seemed to weigh more heavily upon me as I gazed at the ideal scene before me. I was full of the discomfort, the despondency, the vague regrets that follow inevitably on the cessation of joys that are too acute or too prolonged. I suffered.

'I would like to shut my eyes now and never open them again,' Giuliana said, as if speaking in a dream. Then she added, with a shiver: 'I am so cold, Tullio; please go.'

Leaning back in the arm-chair, she shrank together as if to resist the fits of shivering that came over her. Her face, especially about the nostrils, had the livid transparency of certain alabasters. She was suffering.

'You feel ill, poor darling!' I said to her, grieved and a little frightened to see her thus.

'I am only cold. Go and get me my cloak, please —quick——'

I ran down to Calisto, secured the cloak, and returned at once. She hastened to put it on with my assistance. Then she seated herself once more, and, burying her hands in the sleeves, 'That is very nice,' she said.

'Now I will go and get your parasol. Where did you leave it?'

'No, don't—what does it matter?'

But I had a strange longing to return there, to the old stone seat where we had made our first halt, where she had wept so violently, where she had spoken those three divine words: 'Yes, even more.'

Was it out of sentimentality? Was it the curiosity of a new sensation? Was it the fascination exercised over me by the mysterious aspect of the garden at that hour?

'I shall be back in a moment,' said I.

I went down, and when I was under the balcony, I called—'Giuliana!'

She looked over. Before the eyes of my spirit—most distinctly—I shall ever have a vision of that mute apparition in the gloaming: the tall, slender figure, rendered taller still by the long violet mantle and the deathly pallor of that white, white face.

Then she drew back again; or rather, to better describe the impression I had, she vanished. I walked rapidly away down the path, not very clear in my mind as to what was urging me on. My footsteps seemed to echo through my brain. I was so dazed, that I had to stop once or twice to make sure of my way. Whence came this blind unreasoning agitation? From simple physical causes, no doubt; from the peculiar condition of my nerves. Thus I explained it to myself. Incapable of a sustained effort of reflection, of any process of regular examination or of collected thought, I was at the mercy of my nerves; so that everything affected me with such exaggerated intensity that it reached the point of hallucination. However, one or two thoughts flashed brightly and distinctly across the others, increasing that sense of perplexity which more than one unforeseen incident had already aroused in me. Giuliana had struck me to-day as not being quite the same creature I remembered as the 'Giuliana of old.' She had not borne herself, under certain given circumstances, as I should have

expected. Some foreign element, something obscure, excessive, had entered into and modified her personality. Were these alterations to be attributed to a morbid state of health? 'I am ill, I am so ill,' she had repeated again and again, as if in justification. Certainly, illness can produce profound changes, can render a human being almost unrecognisable. But what was her malady? The old original one, not wholly removed by the surgeon's knife, may be, and now become complicated, incurable? 'Who knows but what I may die *soon*,' she had said with peculiar emphasis, that was perhaps prophetic. She had spoken more than once of death. Did she then know for certain that she bore within her a lethal germ? Was she dominated by the thought of death? It was perhaps some such thought that had kindled in her the deeply passionate, the almost desperate ardour she had evinced in my arms. The great and sudden light of her felicity had doubtless rendered the phantoms that pursued her more visible and more terrible.

'Was it possible, then, that she could die, could be stricken down by death in my very arms, in the midst of all our happiness?' I thought to myself, with an icy shudder of fear which held me for a moment where I stood, as if the peril were imminent, as if Giuliana had foretold the truth when she said: 'If, for instance, to-morrow I were dead?'

The evening dews were falling. A faint breeze sighed among the bushes, making a rustle as if some animal were passing swiftly through them. A stray swallow or two cleft the air like a stone from a sling. On the western horizon the light still lingered, like the after-glow of some huge and sinister conflagration.

I reached the seat at last and found the parasol. Here it was that she had let herself drop, overcome, vanquished; here I had spoken the supreme words, had made her my intoxicating confession—'You were at my side while I was searching for you afar'; here it was that I had gathered from her lips that whisper which had instantly raised my soul to the uttermost heights of joy; here I drank her first tears, had listened to her sobs, had put the obscure question: 'Is it too late, perhaps? Is it too late?'

Only a few hours had passed, and yet how far away it all seemed! Only a few hours, and my happiness seemed to have faded and vanished! In another, though no less terrible sense, that question kept recurring within me: 'Is it too late—is it too late?' My pain and agitation increased, and the dubious light, the silent gathering in of shadows, the suspicious noises in the dark bushes, all the weirdness of the gloaming, assumed a baleful significance in my mind.

What if it were really too late—if she really knew herself to be condemned, knew that she carried death within her? Tired of living, tired of suffering, having nothing further to hope for from me, not daring to destroy herself by means of a weapon or by poison, she may have cultivated, have helped on her malady, have kept it hidden that it might spread, become deep-seated, irremediable. It was her intention to be conducted step by step, secretly, towards liberation, towards the end. Watching the symptoms carefully, she has acquired knowledge of her disease, and now she *knows—is certain*—that she must succumb to it; alas! she may know that love, passion, my kisses will hasten the work of destruction. I return

to her for good; a world of unlooked-for felicity opens up before her; she loves me and knows herself to be immeasurably beloved; in one day a dream has become for us reality. And yet, what word comes most frequently to her lips? Death! The horrid visions which had tormented me during the two hours of Giuliana's operation now passed confusedly before me again; when I seemed to have before my eyes, clear as in an anatomical diagram, the appalling devastations disease may bring about in the female frame. And another recollection, further back than this, returned with startling distinctness: the dim and shadowy room, the open window, the fluttering curtains, the wavering flame of the candle in front of the looking-glass—signs of ill omen—and Giuliana leaning against the wardrobe, convulsed and writhing as if in the throes of poison. And the accusing voice repeated those words to me now: 'It is for you, for your sake that she wanted to die. You—you have driven her to her death.'

Seized with blind terror, with a sort of panic, as if these fancies had been grim realities, I set off running towards the house.

When I reached it, it looked to me inanimate as the tomb; the windows and the balconies were full of shadows.

'Giuliana!' I cried, and rushed up the steps and into the house almost as if I feared I should not be in time to see her again.

What ailed me? What madness was this?

Panting, I sped up the dark staircase and burst into the room.

'What has happened?' asked Giuliana, starting to her feet.

'Nothing, nothing—I thought you called me—I have been running. How do you feel now?'

'I am so cold, Tullio, so dreadfully cold. Feel my hands.' She held out her hands to me. They were like ice.

'I feel as icy as that all over——'

'Mio Dio! how did you come to get as cold as that? What can I do to warm you?'

'Don't trouble about it, Tullio. It is not the first time—sometimes it lasts for hours. There is nothing to be done. We must just wait for it to go over. But why is Federico so late? It is almost night.'

She fell back in her chair, as if she had expended all her strength in these few words.

'Now I shall shut the door,' I said, going over to the balcony.

'No, no, leave it open. It is not that that makes me cold. The fresh air does me good. I would rather you came over here, beside me—bring that footstool.'

I knelt down beside her, and she passed her icy hand fondly over my head, murmuring: 'My poor Tullio!'

'But Giuliana, my love, my life, tell me,' I burst out, unable to restrain myself any longer; 'tell me the truth! You are hiding something from me. There is something, I am certain, that you will not confess; some fixed idea, some shadow that has never left you since we came here, since we were—happy. But are we really happy? Are you—can you be really happy? Tell me what it is, Giuliana! Why keep me in the dark? It is true, I know, that you have been ill, that you are still out of health—that is quite true; but it is not that—no. *It is some-*

thing else—something that I do not understand, that I know nothing about. Tell me the truth, even if it should crush me. This morning when you were sobbing so, I asked you: "*Is it too late?*" And you answered: "No, no——" And I believed you. But may it not be too late for some other reason? Is there something which may prevent your full enjoyment of the great happiness that has opened up for us to-day? I mean—something that you know of, that is already in your thoughts? Tell me the truth!'

I looked at her fixedly. She did not speak, and by degrees I seemed to see nothing but her great eyes, extraordinarily dilated and dark and motionless. Everything else around me vanished. I had to close my own in order to dissipate the sense of terror those eyes had inspired in me. How long did the pause last? An hour? A second?

'I am ill,' she said at last with painful hesitancy.

'But in what way?' I stammered, maddened by the thought that I heard in the sound of those few words a confession which fell in with my suspicions. 'In what way ill? *Something that you might die of?*'

I do not know in what manner, in what tone, with what gesture I brought out that final question; I do not even know if it all issued from my lips, if she heard it all.

'No, Tullio, I did not mean that; no—no. I meant that it was not my fault if I were like this—a little strange. It is not my fault. You must have patience with me; you must take me as I am. Believe me, there is nothing else. I am not concealing anything from you. I shall get well, presently. I shall get well. You will have patience with me, won't you?

You will be good and kind? Come here, Tullio, my own. You, too, are a little strange, I think—a little suspicious. You seem to get so suddenly frightened—you turn so pale—one never knows what fancies—— Come, come close to me, give me a kiss—another—another—go on kissing me; warm me. Is that Federico?'

Her voice was broken and a little hoarse, but she spoke with that untranslatable expression—caressing, tender, anxious—which she had used an hour or two before to calm and console me when we sat together on the old stone seat. I kissed her. The chair being wide and low, and she so slender, she made me sit in it beside her and nestled to me shivering, and took a corner of her cloak and tucked it round me. Thus we lay close, breast to breast, our breath mingling. 'Ah,' I thought, 'if only my breath, my contact, could transfuse into her all my warmth!' And I made an illusory effort of will to bring about this transfusion.

'To-night,' I whispered, 'to-night I will hold you close. You will not shiver any more——'

'Yes, yes.'

'I shall watch over you, I shall read upon your face the dreams you are dreaming. Perhaps you will say my name in your dreams——'

'Yes, yes.'

'Now and then you *used* to speak in your sleep. How that delighted me! Ah, that voice! You cannot guess: a voice that you have never heard—only I, I alone. And I am to hear it again. I wonder what it will say? Perhaps my name. How I love the movement of your lips when you pronounce the *u* in my name! It is like the preparation

for a kiss. Do you know that? And I shall whisper words into your ear that may come into your dream. Do you remember how, *in those days*, I used sometimes to guess in the morning what you had been dreaming about? Oh, darling, you will see; it will be sweeter even than then. You will see with what fond care I will cure you. You have need of so much love and tenderness, poor darling.'

'Yes, yes,' she repeated every moment, indulging my last illusion, augmenting the languorous intoxication created in me by my own voice and the belief that it was lulling her like some dreamy love-song.

'Did you hear that?' I asked her, raising myself a little, the better to listen.

'What? Is it Federico?'

'No. Listen.'

We both turned towards the garden and listened.

The garden had melted into a confused dim mass of violet, broken only by the dull gleam of the pond. There still remained a band of light on the extreme edge of the sky: a broad tricoloured zone, blood-red below, then orange, then dead-leaf green. Through the silence of the twilight, a voice rang clear and liquid like the first notes of a flute.

It was the nightingale.

'It is singing in the willow,' Giuliana murmured in my ear.

We listened with our eyes fixed upon the distant band of colour fading slowly behind the impalpable veil of evening. My soul hung suspended on that sound as if I looked for some great revelation of love from it. And the poor creature at my side—what were her feelings during those moments of listening? To what depths of anguish did she descend?

The nightingale began to sing. First came a burst of jubilant melody, a jet of liquid trills that fell through the air like a shower of pearls. A pause. Then a gurgle, rapid, long drawn out, a trial of strength, as if in joyous bravado a challenge to an unseen rival. A second pause. The song took on an elegiac strain, melted into a minor key, softened to a sigh, breathed a low moan, expressed the sadness of a lonely lover, of heartsick desire, deluded hope; then one final appeal, sudden, shrill as a cry of anguish—and died away. Again a pause: longer, graver. And now there came a new tone which hardly seemed to issue from the same throat, so humble was it, so timid, so imploring; more like the cheep of some tender nestling, the twittering of a little sparrow. Then with marvellous rapidity these guileless accents changed to a rush of brilliant runs, an upward flight of trills, vibrating in limpid gurgles, launching into passages of boldest execution,—died away and rose again into soprano heights. The singer was intoxicating himself with his own song. With pauses so brief that the last note had scarcely ceased before the next begun, he poured out his rapture in melody, honey-sweet, impassioned, ever varying; now low, now shrill, now grave, now gay; broken now by fitful sobs and yearning plaints, now by sudden lyric outbursts and supreme invocations. The whole garden seemed to listen, breathless; the sky to lean over the weeping tree among whose boughs an unseen poet was pouring out his heart in floods of melody. The forest of bloom stirred and sighed. A gleam of yellow lingered here and there upon the western horizon, and this, the day's last glance, seemed sad, almost lugubrious. A single star

quivered and throbbed like a drop of luminous dew.

'To-morrów!' I murmured half unconsciously, responding to an inward solicitation by that word which contained so many promises for me.

While we listened to the nightingale we had half risen, and remained in that position for some minutes. Now I suddenly felt Giuliana's head fall heavily on my shoulder.

'Giuliana!' I cried, terror-stricken—'Giuliana!' and with my startled movement her head dropped backwards, like something inanimate.

'Giuliana!'

She did not hear. Gazing at the cadaverous pallor of her face lit up by the last pale gleams of light from the balcony, a terrible thought struck me like a blow. Beside myself with horror, I let her fall back inert against the chair, and, never ceasing to call her by name, I set about unfastening the bosom of her dress with trembling fingers seeking to feel her heart.

'Well, my turtle-doves, where are you?' called the cheerful voice of my brother.

CHAPTER XI

SHE very soon regained consciousness, and, though hardly able to stand, insisted on getting into the carriage and returning home as quickly as possible.

And now, covered by our plaids, she lay back in her corner, silent. My brother and I looked at one another anxiously from time to time. The coachman whipped up the horses, and their quick even trot resounded loudly on the road bordered by flowering hedges in that mild April night under a clear sky.

From time to time Federico would ask Giuliana how she felt.

'Pretty well, thanks; a little better.'

'Are you cold?'

'Yes, rather.'

The answers came with a manifest effort. Our questions seemed to annoy her, till at last—Federico having tried to draw her into conversation—she said: 'You must excuse me, Federico; it tires me to speak.'

The hood of the carriage being up, she was hidden away in deep shadow, motionless under the rugs. More than once I leaned over her and peered into her face, thinking she might be asleep, or fearing that she had fainted again. And each time I was startled afresh to find that her eyes were wide open and staring into the darkness.

There was a long interval of silence. Neither Federico nor I cared to speak. The horses did not seem to me to be going half fast enough. I wished the coachman would put them into a gallop.

'Hurry, Giovanni!'

It was nearly ten when we reached La Badiola, and my mother was looking out for us, quite nervous at our lateness.

When she saw the state that Giuliana was in, she exclaimed—

'I thought all along the excursion would be too much for you!'

'Oh, it is nothing, mama,' said Giuliana, trying to reassure her. 'You will see, I shall be all right to-morrow morning. I am only rather tired.'

But when my mother came to see her in light, she threw up her hands in horror. '*Dio mio! Dio mio!* Your face is enough to frighten one! Why, you can hardly stand.—Edith, Cristina, quick! run and get hot-water bottles for the bed.—Come, Tullio, we must carry her upstairs.'

'No, no,' protested Giuliana, 'don't be frightened, mama; there is nothing serious the matter.'

'I shall drive over to Tussi and fetch the doctor,' Federico interposed. I can be back in about half an hour.'

'No, Federico, don't—I won't have it!' cried Giuliana, almost angrily. 'The doctor can do nothing for me. I know what to take for it. I have everything necessary upstairs. Come along, mama. *Dio mio!* how easily you are frightened, to be sure! Come along, come along.' And she seemed all at once to have recovered her strength. She walked a few steps by herself, but on the stairs my mother and I sup-

ported her. Arrived in her room, she was seized with convulsive shivering, which lasted for some minutes. The women began undressing her.

'Go, Tullio, please go away,' she begged. 'You can come back and see me afterwards. Mama will stay with me in the meantime. Don't worry about me.'

I went into the next room, and sat down on a divan to wait. I listened to the hurrying footsteps of the women, and was devoured with impatience. 'When shall I be allowed to return? When can I be alone with her? I can take care of her; I shall not leave her bedside all night. In an hour or two she will probably grow calmer and feel much better. With my caressing hand upon her hair, perhaps I shall succeed in putting her to sleep.' I had a strange belief in the virtue of my caresses.

Presently Federico came in. 'Well,' he said affectionately, 'it does not seem very serious, I am thankful to say. I have just been speaking to Miss Edith on the stairs. Won't you come down and have something to eat? It is all ready in the dining-room.'

'No, thanks, I don't care for anything just now—later on perhaps. I am waiting for them to call me next door.'

'Then I will go if you don't want me for anything.'

'Yes, do, Federico. I will come down presently. Thanks very much.'

I followed him with my eyes as he went away, and once again my staunch-hearted brother inspired me with a sense of confidence; once again my mind found relief in him.

Three minutes or so passed. A clock on the wall opposite to me measured off the time with the regular swing of its pendulum. The hands pointed to a quarter before eleven. I was just rising impatiently to go to Giuliana's room when my mother hurried in.

'She is quieter now,' she said in low tones, 'but she must have absolute rest—poor girl.'

'Can I go in now?' I asked.

'Yes, go; but do not disturb her more than you can help.'

As I turned to go, she called me back.

'Tullio!'

'Yes, mama, what is it?'

She seemed to hesitate. 'Tell me—since the time of the operation—have you spoken to the doctor at all?'

'O yes, once or twice. Why?'

'Then he reassured you as to the danger—' she hesitated again—'the danger there might be in Giuliana having another child?'

I did not know what to answer, for I had not spoken to the doctor. So I only repeated confusedly, 'Why?'

Again she hesitated before speaking.

'Have you not noticed that Giuliana is *enceinte*?'

I staggered as if I had received a heavy blow full in the chest.

'*Enceinte*?' I stammered, unable for the first moment to grasp the full truth.

My mother took my hands in hers. 'Well, Tullio?'

'I did not know——'

'But you quite frighten me. Then the doctor did not——'

'Yes, the doctor——'

'Come, Tullio, sit down here.'

She drew me down on to the sofa and looked at me bewildered, waiting for me to speak. For some moments, although she was close before my eyes, I did not see her. A violent blaze of light had broken in upon my mind, and the whole drama unrolled itself before me.

Where did I get the strength to resist? What was it preserved my reason? Perhaps in the very excess of my pain and horror I found the heroic force that upheld and saved me.

Hardly had I regained my physical sensibility, my perception of my surroundings, and saw my mother gazing at me in anxiety, than I realised that before all things it was necessary to allay her fears.

'I did not know,' I said; 'Giuliana said nothing to me about it, and I did not notice anything. It comes upon me as a surprise. The doctor certainly did say something about a slight risk—that is why this news makes such an impression on me. . . . You know, Giuliana is so delicate. But really, the doctor did not lay much stress upon it; the operation was so successful. We shall see. We must send for him and consult him——'

'Yes, yes; that is very necessary.'

'But, mama, are you quite sure of this? Did Giuliana confess as much to you, or is it only——'

'I noticed it at first by the usual signs; it is impossible to be mistaken. Up till a day or two ago, Giuliana denied it, or, at any rate, said she was not sure. Knowing how nervous you were about her, she begged me not to say anything about it to you for the present. But I wanted to warn you. Giuliana, as you know, is so careless about her health! And,

you see—instead of getting better, it seems to me she has got steadily worse every day since she has been here; and a week used to be enough to make her look blooming. Do you remember?'

'Yes, so it was.'

'In such cases no precautions can be too great. You must write at once to Dr. Vebesti.'

'Yes, at once.' And feeling that I could not govern myself any longer, I rose, saying that I would go to Giuliana.

'Yes, do—but leave her in peace, do not worry her to-night. I am going downstairs, but I will come back presently.'

'Thanks, mama,' and I touched her forehead with my lips.

'Bless you, my son!' she murmured as she moved away. On the threshold of the door opposite I stood still and watched that gracious figure disappearing—so upright, so noble in its simple black gown.

An indescribable sensation came over me, similar perhaps to what I should have felt had I seen the house fall in ruins around me. My whole inner world was crumbling, falling, sinking into ruin before my eyes, and I could do nothing to arrest it.

CHAPTER XII

WHO has not heard some unfortunate being utter some such phrase as, 'I lived through ten years in that one hour'? To the majority of people such a thing would seem inconceivable. Well, I understand it. In those few minutes of apparently quiet conversation with my mother, I lived through more than ten years. The sudden acceleration of our inner life is the most marvellous and most appalling phenomenon in creation.

What was I to do now? Wild impulses seized me; I would flee far away into the night; I would run and lock myself into my room, there to contemplate my disaster, to realise it to the full. But I had the presence of mind to resist these suggestions. The best part of my nature came to the fore that night. Of the travail of my soul some of my most virile qualities were born. 'It is imperative that none of my actions should appear peculiar or inexplicable to my mother or my brother, or, in fact, to any one in this house,' I said to myself.

In front of Giuliana's door I stopped, impotent to control the violent trembling of my limbs. Hearing footsteps approaching down the corridor, I forced myself resolutely to enter.

Miss Edith came out of the alcove on tiptoe, and signed to me not to make a noise.

'She is just dropping off to sleep,' she whispered. Then she left the room, closing the door very softly behind her.

The hanging lamp in the middle of the ceiling shed a placid, even light. On a chair lay the violet mantle, on another the grey dress which she had worn with so much elegance under the graceful lilacs. The sight of these things gave me such a spasm of pain, that once more I was tempted to fly. I went over to the alcove and drew back the curtains; I saw the bed; I saw the dusky masses of her hair upon the pillow, but not her face; I saw the outline of her form cowering under the bedclothes. The truth rose up before me in all its ignoble brutality. A series of odious images passed before the eyes of my spirit which I was powerless to close—images, not only of what had happened, but of what was inevitably going to happen. Thus with inexorable precision I was forced to see Giuliana as she would be in the future (oh, my Dream, oh, my Ideal!), shapeless and unsightly, bearing beneath her heart the fruit of adultery.

Could any one have imagined a more frightful chastisement? And it was all true—all beyond the possibility of doubt!

When a man's grief exceeds his powers of endurance, he instinctively seeks in *doubt* a momentary alleviation for his intolerable sufferings. 'I may be mistaken,' he thinks to himself; 'my misfortune is, may be, not so great as I think; my pain is perhaps altogether unreasonable.' And during this truce the perplexed and bewildered spirit has time to gain a more exact idea of the true state of things. But with me doubt never presented itself for one moment; I never had an instant's uncertainty. It

would be impossible for me to explain the phenomenon that occurred in my mind, now grown extraordinarily clear. By some secret and spontaneous process taking place within me, all the unheeded signs relative to the dread circumstance ranged themselves in their proper order, forming a logical sequence, complete, coherent, manifest, incontrovertible, which now rushed into my consciousness with the rapidity of some object which, no longer held down by unseen bonds, rises to the surface of the water, floats there, and refuses to be submerged again. No sign, no proof was missing from its appointed place; it required no effort on my part to collect, adjust, and unite the links of the chain. Distant trivial facts were illumined by this new light, fragments of our recent days returned with startling vividness. Giuliana's unwonted aversion to flowers and their scent, her strange fits of agitation and ill-disguised nausea, her sudden blanchings, the measureless fatigue expressed in some of her attitudes, the marked passages in the Russian novel, and the gesture with which she snatched the book out of my hand; and then the scene at Villalilla—those tears, those sobs, her ambiguous words and sibylline smiles, her half-frantic volubility, her frequent mention of death—all these signs grouped themselves round my mother's words, now indelibly graven on my very soul.

My mother had said: '*It is impossible to make a mistake.* Up till a day or two ago, Giuliana denied it, or, at any rate, said *she was not sure.* Knowing how nervous you are, *she begged me not to say anything to you about it*——' The truth could not be more manifest. It was all quite *certain.*

I entered the alcove and approached the bed. The curtains fell-to behind me, shutting out much of the light. Fear took away my breath; the blood stood still in my veins when I leaned over the pillow to look more closely at Giuliana's face, half hidden under the sheet. What would have happened if she had raised her face and spoken to me at that moment, I do not know.

Was she asleep? Only her forehead as far as the eyebrows was visible.

I stood there a moment in expectation. But was she really asleep? She was lying on her side, quite motionless. No sound of breathing reached my ear from her lips under the sheet. None of her face was visible but the forehead as far as the eyebrows.

How should I have conducted myself if she had taken notice of my presence? This was not the time for questions, for our talk. To what extremities would she not have been driven during that night if she had suspected that I knew all? It behoved me, therefore, to simulate an unchanged affection, to pretend entire ignorance, to persist in the expression of those sentiments which had inspired those tender words of mine four hours earlier at Villalilla.

Casting a bewildered look around me, I caught sight upon the floor of her delicate gold embroidered slippers; on a chair close by lay a heap of delicate feminine raiment; and the jealousy of the senses gripped me so remorselessly, that it was only by a miracle that I restrained myself from rudely shaking Giuliana out of her sleep and casting in her face the mad and brutal words suggested to me by my furious anger.

I could only stagger out of the alcove, thinking to myself with blind despair, 'How will it end?'

I determined to go away. 'I will go downstairs. I shall tell my mother that Giuliana is asleep—is sleeping very quietly; I shall say that I too have need of rest. I shall retire to my own rooms; and then—to-morrow morning——' But I got no further than that; I felt powerless to cross the threshold; a thousand fears assailed me. I turned round again, suddenly facing the alcove, as though I felt a gaze fixed upon me. It seemed to me that the curtains moved, but I was mistaken. Nevertheless, something like a wave of magnetism came from between those curtains and drew me irresistibly towards them. With a shudder I re-entered the alcove.

Giuliana was lying in the very same attitude. Was she asleep? Nothing but her forehead as far as the eyebrows was visible.

I seated myself at the bedside and waited. And while I did so, I gazed at that brow, pale as the sheet below it, so fair and pure, so *sisterly*, which so often my lips had kissed religiously, to which my mother's lips had so often been pressed.

No sign of contamination was upon it; to the outward eye it was in nowise changed; and yet no power on earth could ever wash away the stain which the eyes of my soul beheld on that white brow!

Some of the words I had uttered in my last burst of rapture returned to my mind: 'I will watch over you, will read your dreams upon your face.' And I remembered how she repeated, 'Yes, yes,' every moment. And I asked myself, 'What sort of life can she be living in reality? What does she propose to do? What are her plans?' Whereupon I ceased to consider my own troubles, and gave myself up to picturing hers, to understanding the extent of her misery.

In truth, hers must be a despair beyond endurance, without limit, and without reprieve. My punishment was also her punishment, and doubtless more terrible to her than her own. Over at Villalilla—in the garden path, on the seat, in the house—she had most assuredly heard the ring of truth in my voice, had read truth in my face. She believed in the immensity of my love.

'*You were there at my side all the time I was seeking you afar.* Ah, tell me, is that revelation not worth all your tears? Would you not have shed more, even more, for the sake of having such a proof of love?'

'*Yes, even more!*'

So she had replied with her whole soul in her voice, with a sigh that had seemed to me truly divine, '*Yes, even more!*'

She would willingly have shed more tears, would willingly have suffered a greater martyrdom for the sake of such a revelation! And while she saw at her feet the man she had lost and mourned for for years, while she saw a heaven of happiness undreamt of opening up before her, she knew that she was impure, had the material sense of her impurity, had to feel my head lying upon her heart, under which she bore the offspring of another man. Ah, how was it possible that her tears left no mark upon my face? How could I drink them and not be poisoned?

In one moment of time our whole day of love flashed before me. I saw again every expression, even the most fleeting, that passed over Giuliana's face from the moment of our arrival at Villalilla—and now I understood them all. A great light broke in upon me. Ah, when I spoke of 'to-morrow' of the

future! What an awful word that *To-morrow* must have been to her from my lips! And then I recalled our brief dialogue on the balcony, opposite the cypress tree; how she had dwelt upon the idea of sudden death; how she had asked me what I would do if she were to die soon, unexpectedly—what if, for instance, *to-morrow* she were dead? Then, later on, she had clung to me, crying, 'No, no, Tullio, do not speak of the *future*. Think only of to-day, of the passing hour!' Did not these words, these actions, all betray a fatal purpose, a tragic resolve? It was obvious that she had determined to destroy herself, probably this very night, before the undeferrable *to-morrow*, there being no other way of escape for her.

After the first shock of horror at the thought of her imminent peril, I began to consider in my own mind which would have the graver consequences—Giuliana's death or her frailty? The disaster being irreparable, an immediate catastrophe was perhaps preferable to the indefinite prolongation of the ghastly drama. And my imagination made me picture all the phases of Giuliana's new maternity, showed me the intruder who would bear my name, who would have to be my heir, who would usurp the caresses of my mother, my brother, my little daughters. 'Nothing but death can interrupt the fatal course of these events. But could her suicide remain a secret? In what manner did Giuliana propose to kill herself? And the voluntary nature of her death being undeniable, what would my mother, what would my brother think? What a frightful blow it would be to my mother! And Maria? And Natalia? And what was I to do with my life afterwards?'

In truth, it was impossible to me to conceive of my life without Giuliana. I loved the poor thing in spite of it all. Except for that one rush of angry jealousy, I had not yet felt the smallest trace of hatred, or disgust, or contempt for her. No thought of rancour or revenge had crossed my mind. I only felt profound pity for her. From the very first, I accepted all the responsibility of her fall. Exalted and sustained by a proud and generous sentiment, I said to myself: 'She bent her meek head to my blows, and suffered, and was silent; she offered me an example of virile courage and heroic self-abnegation. Now it is my turn. I owe her that. I must save her at all costs.' And this lofty spirit, this good feeling all came to me from her.

I looked at her more closely. She had not stirred, and her face was still hidden. 'Is she really asleep?' I mused, 'or is she only feigning so that no suspicion may be aroused, and she may be left alone? Certainly, if it is her plan not to await the morrow, she is using every means in her power to facilitate its execution. She is feigning sleep. If her slumbers were real, she would not lie so peacefully, so motionless, she whose nerves are so excitable. I shall shake her gently——' But I hesitated: 'Supposing she were really asleep? Sometimes, after some great expenditure of nervous force, sleep falls heavily upon one as a syncope, even in the very midst of the fiercest moral struggles. Oh that this sleep might last till to-morrow, and that she might then rise refreshed and sufficiently strengthened to support the now inevitable interview between us!' Continuing to gaze at her pallid brow, I leaned over her a little further, and observed that it was damp. A

drop of moisture trembled on her eyebrow. Instantly it suggested to me the cold sweat which marks the action of narcotic poisons. A suspicion flashed across me—morphia! Instinctively my eyes flew to the little bed-table at the farther side of the bed in search of the phial with the little black death's head stamped upon it, the familiar poison sign.

On the table there was a carafe of water and a glass, a candlestick, a handkerchief, some hairpins which gleamed in the subdued light—but that was all. I made a rapid examination of the whole alcove, urged on by an agonising fear. 'Giuliana has always had a certain amount of morphia for injections. I am convinced that she has chosen that way of poisoning herself. Where has she hidden the bottle?' My imagination grew more and more excited. I trembled on my chair, and a rapid debate went on in my mind: 'Can she have taken it already? That cold perspiration. But if so, when—how? She has never been alone. But a moment is enough to swallow the contents of a little phial. Then, that convulsive shivering fit just now, directly she got home? Having premeditated suicide, perhaps she carried the morphia about with her. May she not have taken it before reaching La Badiola, in the carriage, in the dark? She forbade Federico to fetch the doctor——' I did not know much about the symptoms of morphia poisoning; but, in my uncertainty, that damp white forehead, Giuliana's absolute immobility, petrified me with fear. I listened eagerly, hoping and yet fearing that my mother would come in. Then—and I could not have trembled more had I been removing the covering from the face of a dead person—I slowly,

very slowly, drew away the sheet from Giuliana's face.

She opened her eyes.

'Ah, Tullio, is that you?'

She spoke quite naturally.

'Were you asleep?' I asked, surprised to find that I could speak at all, and avoiding her eyes.

'Yes, I had just dropped off.'

'Then I woke you—I am so sorry—I only wanted to uncover your mouth; I was afraid you could not breathe properly—that the clothes were too heavy for you——'

'Yes, you are quite right; I am much too hot now. Please relieve me of some of these bed-clothes.'

I rose and did as she required. But how shall I describe my state of mind with regard to what I was doing, the words I spoke and listened to, all these things which were happening as naturally as if nothing had occurred, as if Giuliana and I had been free of all cause for disquietude, just as if this peaceful alcove did not contain adultery, dissimulation, remorse, jealousy, fear, death—every torment of the human heart!

'Is it very late?' she asked.

'No, not yet midnight.'

'Has mama gone to bed?'

'Not yet.'

After a pause, she resumed, 'And you—are you not going? You must be very tired——'

I did not know what to answer. Should I say that I would stay here?—beg her to let me remain?—repeat the tender words I had spoken while we sat in the arm-chair in our room at Villalilla? But, if I stayed, in what manner should I pass the night?

Sitting at her bedside watching over her? Could I carry it through? Should I be able to keep up appearances to the end?

'You had better go away, Tullio—for to-night,' she went on. 'I shall not require anything more now—only rest. If you stayed—I should feel worse. It will be better that you should go—just for this night, Tullio.'

'But you might want something.'

'No, I shall not. Besides, in any case, Cristina is sleeping in the next room.'

'I can lie down over there on the sofa, under a rug——'

'Why should you make yourself so uncomfortable? You are very tired—I can see that by your face. Besides, if I knew you were there, I should not sleep. Be good, Tullio, and do as I say! First thing to-morrow morning you can come back and see me. Now we have need of rest, both of us—complete rest.'

Her voice was low and caressing, without the least unusual tone. Excepting her insistence that I should leave her, there was nothing to point to a fatal resolution on her part. She seemed prostrate with fatigue, but perfectly calm. From time to time she closed her eyes, as if her lids were heavy with sleep. What should I do? Leave her to herself? But her very calm frightened me—such calm could only come from firmness of purpose. What had I better do? All things considered, even my presence during the night would be unavailing. She could perfectly well carry out her intention, being prepared, and having the means at hand. Was it to be morphia? Where had she the bottle concealed?—under her

pillow?—in the drawer of the bed-table? How should I begin to look for it? Supposing I said boldly, 'I know that you mean to destroy yourself.' But then, what a scene would follow; it would be impossible to conceal the rest. All these perplexing, conflicting thoughts exhausted the little strength I had left. My nerves were totally unstrung. My physical fatigue grew momentarily greater. My whole organism entered into that condition of extreme weakness in which every voluntary function becomes suspended; action and reaction either do not correspond to one another, or cease to occur at all. I felt powerless to resist, to struggle, to act to any purpose whatever. The sense of my own incapacity, of the necessity of all that was happening and about to happen, paralysed me. I felt a blind desire to escape even from this last dim consciousness of being alive. And finally, all my feelings merged into one despairing thought, 'Come what may, there is death for me too.'

'Yes, Giuliana,' I said, 'I will leave you in peace. Go to sleep. We shall see each other to-morrow.'

'You can hardly stand upon your feet.'

'Yes, it is true. Goodbye. Good-night!'

'Are you not going to give me a kiss, Tullio?'

An instinctive shudder of repugnance went through me. I hesitated.

At this point my mother came back.

'What! you are awake?' she exclaimed.

'Yes, but I am just going to sleep again.'

'I have been in to see the children. Natalia was wide awake. She asked me at once, "Has mama come home?" She wanted to come to you——'

'Why did you not tell Edith to bring her? Has Edith gone to bed?'

'No.'

'Good-night, Giuliana,' I interrupted.

I went nearer, leaned over, and kissed the cheek she offered me, raising herself a little on her elbow.

'Good-night, mama; I am going to bed; I am dropping with sleep.'

'And you will not have anything to eat? Federico is downstairs waiting for you.'

'No, mama, thank you—good-night!'

I kissed her too upon the cheek, and went away hurriedly, without one look at Giuliana. Gathering together the little strength that remained to me, no sooner had I crossed the threshold of the room than I set off running down the corridor for fear of sinking down helpless before reaching my own door.

I threw myself upon the bed, shaken by that tremor which precedes an outburst of tears, when the knot of anguish begins to loosen, when the tension begins to grow slacker. But the tremor continued, and the tears did not come. My sufferings were horrible. An enormous weight seemed to press me down—a weight that was not upon me, but within me, as if my bones and my muscles had been turned to solid lead. Yet my brain went on thinking; my mind was still vigilant!

No, I ought not to have left her; I ought not to have consented to go away. When my mother goes she will certainly kill herself. The sound of her voice when she expressed the wish to see Natalia! An hallucination took instant possession of me. My mother would leave the room. Giuliana would sit up in bed and listen. Then, sure at last of being

alone, she would open the drawer of the bed-table and take out the bottle of morphia; there was not a moment's hesitation, with a resolute gesture she emptied the bottle; she lay down again under the bedclothes and waited. . . . The vision of the corpse appeared before me with such distinctness that I threw myself from the bed like one possessed, and wandered about the room, knocking myself against the furniture, stumbling over the carpet, gesticulating like a madman.

I opened the window. The night was calm and still. The frogs kept up a ceaseless, monotonous croaking. The stars throbbed. Opposite to me blazed the Great Bear. Time was running on.

I remained for some minutes at the window gazing at the great constellation which, to my perturbed sight, appeared to be coming nearer. What was I waiting for? I did not know; I was all confused, bewildered. All I realised with any distinctness was the emptiness of that vast sky. Suddenly into this kind of dubious pause, as if some obscure influence had acted upon my inner consciousness, there fell the question, till then not wholly understood, '*What have you made of me?*' And the vision of the corpse, which had faded somewhat, returned with redoubled force.

My horror was so great that, hardly knowing what I meant to do, I left my room and, without hesitation, directed my steps towards Giuliana's. In the passage I met Miss Edith.

'Where are you coming from, Edith?' I asked. And I noticed that she looked aghast at my appearance.

'I carried Natalia into her mother's room, as she wished to see her; but I have had to leave the child

there. It was impossible to persuade her to come back to her own bed. She cried so much that her mother was obliged to consent to keep her there. It is to be hoped Maria will not wake too——'

'Ah, then——' My heart beat so violently that it choked my utterance. 'Ah, then, Natalia has remained in her mother's bed?'

'Yes, signore.'

'And Maria . . . let us go and see Maria.'

My emotion suffocated me. For this night, at least, Giuliana was safe! It was out of the question that she should think of making an end of herself that night, with the child beside her. By a miracle, Natalia's fond caprice had saved her mother's life. Thank God! Thank God!

Before looking at the sleeping Maria, I looked at the other little empty bed, where a small depression still remained. Strange longings came over me to kiss the pillow, to feel if the impression left by the little body were still warm. The presence of Edith restrained me. I turned to Maria and leaned over her with bated breath, and gazed at her long; going over, one by one, her various points of resemblance to myself, almost counting the delicate veins that showed on her temples, her cheeks, her throat. She was lying on her side with her head thrown back, so that the entire little throat was visible beneath the uplifted chin. The teeth, like tiny grains of rice, gleamed between the parted lips. The lashes, long like those of her mother, cast a shadow that touched the top of her cheeks. The fragility of some rare and exquisite floweret, an extreme refinement, marked this childish form, in which I *felt* that my blood flowed untainted.

When, since the two little creatures were born, had I felt for them a sentiment so profound, so sweet, and so sad?

It was with difficulty that, at last, I tore myself away. I would like to have sat down between the two little beds, and leaning my head against the empty one, have thus awaited the *morrow*.

'Good-night, Edith,' I said as I left, and my voice shook.

When I regained my room, I threw myself once more upon the bed, and this time I burst into tears, sobbing wildly.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN I awoke from the leaden—almost one might say brutal—sleep that, at last, crashed down upon me that night, I had the utmost difficulty in regaining a collected notion of what had occurred.

Little by little, however, the truth—cold, naked, inexorable—presented itself before my spirit, shattered as it was by the conflicting excitements of the preceding night. But what were all my recent torments in comparison with the despair that filled me now!—I had to live! It was as though some one should offer me a deep cup and say, 'If you want to live, you must press into this cup all the blood in your heart, even to the last drop!' An indefinable repulsion, disgust, revolt, rose up out of the very depths of my being. And yet I was obliged to live, was obliged to accept the fact of life even on this morning! Above all things, I must *act!*

The contrast between my real awakening and the one I had dreamed and hoped for at Villalilla the day before increased my torment. 'It is not possible,' I thought to myself, 'that I should calmly accept such a state of things; it is not possible that I should get up, and dress, and go out of this room, and see Giuliana again and speak to her; that I can go on

keeping up appearances before my mother; that I can watch for a favourable opportunity for a decisive interview with Giuliana, and in that interview establish the conditions of our future existence. It is impossible.—Well, what then?—The complete and instantaneous destruction of all my suffering. I must escape from it all—must free myself. *There is nothing else.* And contemplating the facility of the thing, imagining the rapid action, the report of the firearm, the instant effect of the bullet, the darkness that would succeed, I felt a peculiar tension throughout my body, painful and yet mixed with a sense of relief, almost of pleasure. *There is nothing else.* Oh, the comfort of knowing nothing more; all anxiety and trouble blotted out; the end of all things!

There was a knocking at the door, and my brother's voice cried—

'Tullio, are you not up yet? It is nine o'clock. May I come in?'

'Yes, come in, Federico.'

'Do you know what time it is?' he asked as he entered. 'Past nine o'clock.'

'I did not get to sleep till very late, and I was dreadfully tired.'

'How are you now?'

'Pretty well.'

'Mama is up. She says that Giuliana is fairly well. Shall I open the window? It is a magnificent morning.'

He threw the window wide. A flood of fresh air streamed into the room, and the curtains swelled out like sails, showing the sky between.

'Do you see?'

Doubtless the bright light showed up the signs on

my face of last night's conflict, for he exclaimed, 'But you must have felt ill too last night!'

'I think I was rather feverish and overdone.'

Federico gazed at me with his clear honest eyes, and at that moment I seemed to feel upon my soul the weight of all the lies and dissimulation of the future. Oh, if he had only known!

But, as was ever the case, his presence drove away all the devils that possessed me. A fictitious energy, such as follows on a draught of cordial, inspired me. 'How would he act in my place?' I mused. My past, my education, the very essence of my nature precluded a parallel, but so much at least was certain—in the event of misfortune, whether similar or otherwise, he would have acted as a man of strength and character, would have faced his trouble heroically, and would assuredly have sacrificed himself rather than let any one else be sacrificed.

'Let me feel,' he said, coming over to me. He felt my forehead with the palm of his hand, and then put his finger on my wrist. 'Why, what an uneven pulse!'

'I must get up now, Federico, it is so late.'

'This afternoon I am going to the wood by the river. If you like, I will have Orlando saddled for you. You remember that wood? What a pity Giuliana is not well; we might have taken her with us! We can see the charcoal-burners at work.'

In mentioning Giuliana's name, his voice seemed to become more affectionate, warmer, almost one would say more fraternal. Oh, if he had known!

'Good-bye then, Tullio; I am off to my work. When are you going to begin to help me?'

'This very day—to-morrow—whenever you like.'

He laughed. 'What amazing zeal! Well, I shall put you to the proof! Good-bye.'

And he went away with his firm, frank step, intent on carrying out the exhortation engraved upon the sundial, *Hora est benefaciendi.*

CHAPTER XIV

It was ten o'clock when I left my room. The blaze of April sunshine which inundated La Badiola, streaming in through the open window and balconies, frightened me. How was I to wear my mask under that searching light?

I went to look for my mother before venturing into Giuliana's room.

'You were late in getting up,' she said. 'How are you?'

'All right.'

'You look pale.'

'I think I was rather feverish in the night, but I feel better now.'

'Have you seen Giuliana?'

'Not yet.'

'She wanted to get up—the dear girl. She says that she feels quite well; but to look at her——'

'I am going to her now.'

'And you must not lose any time in writing to the doctor. Never mind what Giuliana says—write to-day.'

'You told her—that I *know*?'

'Yes, I told her that you knew.'

'I am going, mama.'

I left her in front of her great linen presses, all fragrant with orris-root, in which two women had

accumulated the fair white linen, the glory of Casa Hermil. Maria was at the piano having a lesson from Miss Edith, and chromatic scales succeeded one another rapidly and evenly. Pietro, the most faithful of servants, passed by—bald, somewhat bent with years—carrying a tray of glasses that jingled with the trembling of his aged hands. Everything around me in this flood of air and light assumed an aspect of tranquil blitheness; everywhere was diffused a nameless sense of goodness—something, it might be, of the faint and inextinguishable smile of the Lares and Penates.

Never had this sentiment penetrated my heart so deeply. So much peace, so much goodness surrounding the ignoble secret that Giuliana and I were forced to guard and yet not die!

'And now, what next?' I thought to myself, as I wandered through the passage like a bewildered stranger, unable to direct my steps towards the dreaded room, as if my limbs refused to obey the impulsion of my will. 'What next? She knows that I know the truth. Dissimulation between us is now useless. The time has come when we must look one another in the face, when we must speak of this awful thing. But this duel must not, cannot take place this morning. The consequences are beyond foretelling. And it is now more than ever necessary that none of our actions should seem remarkable or inexplicable to my mother, or my brother, or any one in this house. My excitement last night, my anxiety, my depression, can all be put down to the thought of the possible danger of Giuliana's condition; but, in the eyes of the others, this very thought should make me more tender, more

solicitous, more careful for her than ever. I must exercise extreme prudence to-day. At all costs, I must avoid a scene with Giuliana to-day. I must avoid all occasion of being alone with her—to-day. On the other hand, I must at once find some means of making her understand the feeling which dictates this attitude of mine towards her, the plan which regulates my conduct. And what if she persists in her determination to commit suicide? What if she had only deferred the execution of her plan for a few hours, was only awaiting her opportunity? This last idea suddenly put an end to my hesitations and forced me to act. I was like those Eastern soldiers who had to be driven into battle with blows of the fist.

I went into the music-room. No sooner did Maria catch sight of me than she broke off her exercises and ran to me with joy, delighted to be free. She had all the grace, the quickness, the airiness of a winged creature. I lifted her up in my arms and kissed her.

'Will you take me with you?' she asked. 'I am quite tired; Miss Edith has kept me here such a long time. I can't do any more. Take me out with you! *Let us take a walk before breakfast.*'[1]

'Where to?'

'*Where you please, it is the same to me.*'

'But let us go to mama first.'

'Ah, yesterday you went to Villalilla, and we had to stay at home. And it was you, you naughty papa, who would not take us with you—mama would have. *We should like to go there. Tell me how you amused yourselves.*'

It was sweet to hear her singing like a bird in a

[1] The italics are English in the original.

language not her own, and this musical twitter formed a running accompaniment to my anxious thoughts while we proceeded together to Giuliana's rooms. As I hesitated, Maria thumped her little fist upon the door, calling, 'Mama!'

Giuliana, unsuspicious of my presence, opened the door herself. When she saw me, she started as if she had seen a ghost or something terrifying.

'You?' she stammered, but so low as to be scarcely audible, and her lips blanched as she moved them; after her first start of terror, she had become rigid as a statue.

We looked at one another, there, across the threshold—gazed fixedly—and for one moment each gazed into the other's soul. Our surroundings vanished; between us all was said, all was understood, all was resolved upon in that one instant of time.

What happened after that I do not rightly know, I do not remember clearly. I know that for a while my consciousness of what was going on around me was intermittent, had lapses—somewhat similar, I fancy, to the voluntary abstraction of mind which can be produced by the patient in certain maladies. My faculties were blurred; I could neither see nor hear what was occurring, could not grasp the sense of what was being said. Then, after a while, my senses returned, I was able to fix my attention on the things and the persons around me, to understand and examine them intelligently.

Giuliana had seated herself, and had Natalia on her knee. I too was seated; and Maria ran from one to the other in perpetual motion, talking without a pause for breath, teasing her sister, asking a dozen questions to which nobody gave any answer,

except perhaps by a sign of the head. Among one of the fragments which I heard, Maria said to her sister—

'Ah, you slept with mama last night, didn't you?'

'Yes, because I am so little,' answered Natalia.

'Oh, but it is my turn to-night, you know. Isn't it, mama? I may come into your bed to-night, mama?'

Giuliana neither answered nor smiled; she seemed absorbed in thought. Her arms were round Natalia's waist, and her hands lying clasped in the little girl's lap—who leaned her shoulders against her mother's bosom—were whiter than the frock on which they rested, and so thin, so worn, that they alone revealed a world of sorrow and suffering. Natalia's head just reached to her mother's chin, and Giuliana had buried her lips in the child's curls; so that when I did cast a glance at her, I could not see the lower part of her face nor the expression of her mouth. Her eyes never met mine; but each time I looked at her, I saw the drooping, slightly reddened lids, and each time the sight perturbed me, as if the gaze of the eyes they covered were shining through them.

Was she waiting for me to speak to her? Were words she dared not utter rising to her hidden lips?

At last, with a great effort, I managed to drag myself out of this state of inaction in which extraordinary clearness and obscurity of mind lay side by side, and I said (and my words, I fancy, gave the impression of being the continuation of a dialogue already begun, additional words to some already said), I remarked in a low voice—

'Mama wants me to write for Dr. Vebesti, and I promised I would. I shall write to-day.'

She did not raise her eyes; she made no response.

Maria, in her profound innocence, looked at her surprised; then she looked at me.

I rose to go.

'This afternoon, I am going to the wood by the river with Federico. We shall meet again this evening when I come back?'

As she made no sign in answer, I repeated in a voice that conveyed all I could not express, 'We shall meet again this evening, when I come back?'

And the lips among Natalia's curls breathed, 'Yes.'

CHAPTER XV

In the violence of my many and conflicting agitations, in the first outburst of grief, under the menace of imminent danger, I had not yet stopped to consider the question of the Other. But also, from the very first moment, I had never had the shadow of a doubt as to the justice of my old suspicion. Instantly, in my own mind, the Other had assumed the image of Filippo Arborio; and at the first rush of jealousy which assailed me in Giuliana's bedroom, his odious image had been associated with hers in a series of abhorrent visions.

And now, while Federico and I rode towards the forest along the tortuous river I had watched on that dreary Saturday afternoon, the Other was ever with us; the figure of Filippo Arborio insinuated itself between me and my brother, animated so intensely by my hatred, that in looking at it I had a *sensation of reality*, a physical repulsion, something of the savage thrill I had sometimes experienced on confronting my adversary before a duel, at the signal for attack.

My brother's presence increased my distress enormously. Compared with Federico, the figure of the other man—so over refined, so nervous, so emasculate—dwindled to miserable proportions, became offensive and ignoble in my eyes. Under the

influence of the new ideal of strength and manly simplicity inspired in me by my brother's example, I not only loathed, but I despised this complicated and ambiguous being notwithstanding that he belonged to my own strain, and that we had certain intellectual peculiarities in common, as was evident in his literary work. I imagined him like one of his own characters; affected by the saddest maladies of the mind, warped, false, cruelly inquisitive, soured by the habit of analysis and studied irony, continually occupied in converting the warmest and most spontaneous movements of the soul into hard and fast conceptions, wont to regard every human being purely as a subject for psychological speculation, incapable of love, incapable of a generous action, of renunciation, of self-sacrifice, hardened in duplicity, licentious, cynical, vile.

By this man Giuliana had been seduced—certainly never loved. The tactics he had employed were apparent in the dedication written on the fly-leaf of *The Secret*, the sole documentary evidence, within my knowledge, of the past relations between the novelist and my wife. To him she had never been anything but an object of sensual passion, that was certain. To lay siege to and take the Tower of Ivory, to corrupt a woman popularly lauded as incorruptible, to test his powers of seduction on so rare a subject, were enterprises arduous enough but full of attraction, and worthy in all respects of a cunning artist, of the fastidious psychologist who had written the *Cattolicissima* and *Angelica Doni*.

The longer I thought over it, the more the facts appeared before me in all their brutal crudity. Filippo Arborio had undoubtedly come upon Giuliana

in one of those periods in which a woman—however so called 'spiritual'—who has suffered from long and systematic neglect is stirred by sentimental aspirations, indefinite desires, vague poetic languors; all, in reality, nothing more nor less than the mask behind which the lower animal appetites disguise themselves. An expert in divining the special physical condition of the woman he wished to subjugate, Arborio had adopted the most effective and certain method of dealing with her; had discoursed of ideality, of lofty spiritual aims, of mystical affinities and unions, and had been busy meanwhile with the exploiting of other and more carnal mysteries; brain and hands had united in the manipulation of this delicate and intricate piece of work. And Giuliana—the *Turris eburnea*, the creature composed of ductile gold and finely tempered steel, the Perfect One—had lent herself to that time-worn farce, had allowed herself to be taken in that ancient snare, had obeyed the old common law of woman's frailty! And the sentimental duet had ended in a shameful embrace.

My soul was rent with hideous derision. I seemed to feel within me the convulsions caused by that poisonous weed which sets a grin upon the face of those who die of eating it. I dashed the spurs into my horse and galloped off along the river's bank.

The bank is dangerous, extremely narrow in parts, at certain points liable to landslips, at others encumbered by the branches of great knotted trees or intersected by enormous roots flush with the ground. I was perfectly aware of the peril to which I was exposing myself; but instead of drawing in my horse, I urged him on to greater speed, not with the intention

of meeting my death, but seeking in this dangerous excitement some respite from my intolerable pain. I had already proved the efficacy of such foolhardiness. Ten years before, when I was very young and attached to the embassy at Constantinople, one moonlight night, in order to escape from the haunting recollection of certain unfortunate and recent love passages, I had ridden into one of those Mussulman cemeteries, so dense with tombs, where I galloped among the half-sunken gravestones, running a thousand chances of falling and being dashed to pieces.

'Tullio, Tullio! Stop!' shouted Federico out of the distance. 'Stop!'

I paid no heed to him. More than once, it was only by a miracle that I avoided striking my forehead against a branch; more than once, at the narrowest passes, I thought I must inevitably be precipitated into the foaming river below. But when I heard the thunder of another horse behind me, and found that Federico was following me at full gallop, I was afraid for him, and reined up my poor beast so sharply that he reared and stood on end for an instant, beating the air as if on the point of plunging into the river; then he brought his feet down and stood still, quivering in every limb. I was covered with shame and confusion.

'Are you out of your mind?' cried Federico, as he came up with me pale as death.

'Did I frighten you? Forgive me; I did not think there was any danger. I only wanted to try the horse. Then I found I could not stop him; he is a little hard in the mouth——'

'Hard in the mouth—Orlando?'

'Don't you think so?'

He looked at me sharply with an expression of uneasiness. I tried to smile. His pallor—so unusual with him—grieved and touched me.

'I cannot think how you escaped dashing your brains out against one of these trees, nor how you managed not to fall into——'

'And you?'

In order to follow me, he had run the gauntlet of the same perils or worse, his horse being heavier, and he having to gallop it at full speed that he might reach me in time. We both looked back at the road we had traversed.

'It is a miracle,' he said, 'and to get safe out of the Assoro is next to impossible. Did you not know that?'

We gazed down upon the deadly stream. Deep, oily, rapid, full of whirlpools and treacherous undercurrents, the Assoro flowed between its chalky banks in a silence that only rendered it more appalling. Its surroundings reflected this aspect of perfidy and menace. The afternoon sky was heavy with vapours, and diffused a dead-white languid light over a stretch of reddish-brown brushwood, as yet untouched by spring. Dead leaves mingled with the living, dried and withered twigs with fresh young ones, dead and new-born green in one dense interwoven mass. And over the sullen river, as over the symbolical contrasts of the thicket, the sky leaned white and languid.

'A sudden plunge, and all thought, all suffering would have been at an end; I should no longer have had to bear the burden of my miserable flesh. But possibly I might have dragged my brother with me to destruction—so noble a form of life, a Man. I am saved by a miracle that he may be saved. My

folly has exposed him to the risk of his life. A world of noble and beautiful things would have perished with him. What fatality drives me to bring such misery upon all who love me?'

I looked at Federico. He had become thoughtful and very grave. I dared not question him, but I was overwhelmed with remorse at having grieved him. What was he thinking about? What reflections were helping to swell his distress? Did he perhaps guess that I was concealing a wound I dared not confess to, and that the spur of a fixed idea had set me off upon that mortal gallop?

We proceeded along the river-bank in single file and in silence, and then struck into a path through the wood. As it was fairly broad, we rode once more side by side, our horses snorting and laying their heads together as if exchanging confidences and mingling the foam on their bits.

From time to time I shot a glance at Federico, and always found him with the same stern gravity upon his face. 'If I were to reveal the truth to him,' I thought to myself, 'he would certainly not believe me; he could not bring himself to believe in Giuliana's —his sister's—fall. I really could not decide whether his affection or that of my mother for Giuliana is the more profound. Has he not always had upon his table the portrait of our poor Costanza and that of Giuliana united as in a diptych for the same loving adoration? Even this morning, how his voice softened as he spoke of her!' And suddenly, by contrast, the stain seemed deeper, more hideous than before; and while the excitement of my mad ride still tingled in my veins, by that hereditary combative instinct which had so often been awakened

in me by rude contact with other men, I felt that no power on earth could restrain me from affronting Filippo Arborio. 'I shall go to Rome and seek him out, and provoke him in such a manner as to force him to fight, and then I shall do my utmost to kill him or else maim him for life.' I judged him to be pusillanimous. I remember how he had presented a rather ridiculous figure on that occasion in the fencing school when he happened to receive a stroke full in the chest from the fencing-master. I also recalled his curiosity as to my duel; the wide-eyed puerile curiosity of one who has never faced danger. I remembered that during my fencing bout he had never taken his eyes off me. The consciousness of my superiority, the certainty that I could overcome him, lightened my spirits. As in a vision, I saw a red stream trickling over his pallid, repulsive flesh. Certain fragments of actual sensations experienced in former days when I confronted other men helped to fill in the details of the imaginary scene which it pleased me to construct. And I saw him lying bleeding and motionless upon a stretcher in some distant meadow, while two surgeons bent over him frowning grimly.

How often had I—idealist, *fin-de-siècle* sophist though I was—congratulated myself on being the descendant of that Raimondo Hermil of Penedo who performed such prodigies of valour and ferocity at Goletta under the eyes of Charles the Fifth! The excessive development of the intellectual side of my nature and my versatility of sentiment had not been able to modify the foundation of my being, the hidden substratum in which were inscribed all the traits inherited from my race. In my brother, a

man of even balance, thought was always accompanied by action; in me, thought predominated, but without destroying my faculty for action, which not unfrequently displayed itself with extraordinary vehemence. I was, in fact, a consciously violent and passionate man, in whom the co-ordination necessary to ensure the normal activity of the mind was rendered impossible by the hypertrophy of certain cerebral centres. Though most lucid in my self-analysis, I had all the impulses of a primitive and undisciplined nature. More than once, I had been assailed by sudden criminal temptations; had more than once been surprised by the spontaneous insurrection of a cruel instinct.

'There are the charcoal-burners,' said my brother, putting his horse into a trot.

The sound of axe-strokes came from the forest, and we could see spirals of smoke rising between the trees. The colony of charcoal-burners greeted us respectfully. Federico questioned the men as to the progress of the work; advised, admonished them; examined the furnaces with an experienced eye. They all listened to him with respect and attention. The work seemed suddenly to have become easier, heartier, cheerier, the fires to burn more brightly. Men hurried hither and thither, throwing in earth where the smoke was issuing too copiously, closing up with clods of turf cracks opened by the heat. Guttural cries came from the wood-cutters, mingling with the rough voices of the furnace-men. From the depths of the forest came the low rumble of a falling tree. Thrushes sang in the intervals; and the great forest looked down mutely at the fires fed by its life.

Leaving my brother to continue his supervision of the work, I wandered off, letting my horse choose what path he would among the many that spread away before us. The sounds grew fainter behind me, the echoes died away. Deep silence reigned under the lofty trees. 'What can I do in order to come to a decision?' I thought. 'What will my life be to-morrow and afterwards? Can I go on living in my mother's house with my secret? Shall I find it possible to adapt my existence to Federico's? Who or what in this wide world will ever be able to rekindle a spark of faith in my soul?' The last faint sounds of human labour ceased, the solitude around me was complete. 'Work, do good, live for others—could I *now* find the true meaning of life in these things? The other day, when my brother was speaking on the subject, I thought I understood his words; I believed that the *doctrine of truth* was being revealed to me out of his mouth. According to him, the doctrine of truth lies not in laws or in precepts, but simply and solely in the meaning a man puts into his life. I seemed to have understood. And now, all at once, I was thrust back into the darkness; I had become blind again; I understood nothing. Who or what in all the wide world could ever make up to me for what I have lost?' The future looked appalling, hopeless. The indeterminate image of the creature that should be born grew and dilated like one of those horrible shapeless things we see in nightmares, and occupied my whole field of vision. There was no question here of regret, remorse, of an indelible memory, of any mental burden however heavy, but of a living being. My future was linked with a creature imbued with a

tenacious and malignant life; was fettered to a stranger, an interloper, an abhorrent creature against whom not only my spirit, but my flesh, every drop of blood, every fibre of my body, rose up in loathing—brutal, fierce, implacable, till death, yea, and even beyond that. 'Could any one imagine a more hideous torture for soul and body together? The most ingeniously cruel of tyrants could not invent certain inhuman ironies which Fate alone can devise. While Giuliana was brooding over her shameful secret, I, poor fool, was feeding on dreams, drinking deep draughts of the ideal, had returned to the guileless emotions of adolescence, had nothing better to do than to gather flowers. (Oh, those flowers, those sickening flowers, offered with such boyish timidity!) And after a grand scene of sentimental rapture, I receive the charming tidings—from whom?—from my mother! And after that I have a rush of generous exaltation, adopt, in all good faith, a noble part, sacrifice myself in silence like one of Octave Feuillet's heroes! A fine hero in truth!' The irony of it all wrung my soul, and once more the wild desire for flight took hold upon me.

I looked up. Close before me, between the trees, unreal as a mirage in the desert, shone the Assoro. 'Strange!' I thought with a curious thrill. I did not notice till this moment that the horse, left to his own guidance, had turned into a path that led to the river. It would almost seem that the Assoro had drawn me back to it.

For an instant I remained in doubt whether to go on towards the river or to turn back. But I shook off the fascination of the water and my evil thought, and turned my horse.

A crushing sense of lassitude fell upon me after the inward conflict. My soul seemed suddenly to have become but a poor bruised thing—withered, shrunken, miserable. I melted into pity for myself, pity for Giuliana, for every creature on whom sorrow has laid its stigmata, for every creature that trembles in the rude grasp of life, as the vanquished tremble under the relentless hand of the victor. And life appeared to me at that moment spread out like a vision, distant, confused, vaguely monstrous. Madness, imbecility, poverty, blindness, every disease and every misfortune; the continual stirring of obscure inconscient forces—primordial, bestial—in the secret recesses of our being; the highest manifestations of the spirit, fleeting, unstable, for ever dependent on physical conditions, bound up with the functions of some special organ; the instantaneous transfiguration produced by an imperceptible cause, a trifle; the inevitable portion of selfishness in the noblest deeds; the waste of so much moral energy directed towards an uncertain issue; the futility of love believed to be eternal; the frailty of virtue believed to be impeccable; the weakness of the healthiest will, —all the shame, all the misery of humanity rose up before me in that hour. 'How can we possibly live? How can we love?'

The strokes of the axe resounded through the forest; a short, harsh cry accompanied every blow. Here and there in the open spaces great wood piles shaped like flattened cones or square pyramids sent up columns of smoke which rose straight and dense into the still air like trunks of trees.

I guided my horse to a pile close by, where I had caught sight of Federico.

He had dismounted, and was talking to a tall old man with a clean-shaven face.

'Oh, there you are at last!' he cried as I rode up. 'I was afraid you had lost yourself.'

'No, I did not go very far.'

'Here you see Giovanni di Scordio, a Man,' he said, laying a hand on the old man's shoulder.

I looked at the man. A singularly sweet smile appeared upon the wrinkled mouth. Never had I seen such mournful eyes under a human brow.

'Good-bye, Giovanni. Courage!' added my brother, in that voice which seemed, at times, to have the power, like certain draughts, of raising the vital tone. —'We must be making our way back to La Badiola, Tullio. It is late, and they will be looking out for us.'

He mounted his horse again with a parting greeting to the old man, and we rode away, side by side, first passing by the furnaces, where he gave some last orders to the men touching the operations of the coming night.

The sky opened out gradually above our heads. Floating veils of mist dispersed and joined again, so that the blue paled and shone out again continually. It was near the hour when, on the day before at Villalilla, Giuliana and I had gazed at the garden all flooded with an ideal light. The wood was beginning to be touched with gold; birds sang, invisible among the branches.

'Did you take a good look at that old man, Giovanni di Scordio?' Federico asked presently.

'Yes,' I answered. 'I don't think I could ever forget his smile and his eyes.'

'That man is a saint!' continued Federico. 'No

man ever worked and suffered as much as he has. He has had fourteen children, and one by one they have all left him as the ripe fruit drops from the tree. The wife, a terrible shrew, is dead. He is quite alone. His children have stripped him of everything, and then cast him off. Every form of human ingratitude has been poured upon him. And it is not the unkindness of strangers, but of his own flesh and blood, that he has had to endure, you understand. His own blood has turned to venom in creatures whom he has always loved and helped, whom he loves still, whom he never thinks of cursing, whom he will certainly bless at his last hour even though they let him die alone. Is it not wonderful, almost incredible, such persistent goodness in a man? After all he has suffered, to have been able to preserve such a smile as you saw! *You would do well, Tullio, not to forget that smile——*'

CHAPTER XVI

THE hour of trial, the hour so longed for and yet feared, was at hand. Giuliana was ready. She had firmly resisted Maria's whim, had remained alone in her room waiting for me.

What would I say to her? what would she say to me? What attitude should I adopt towards her? Every prearranged plan, every idea vanished, and nothing remained to me but an intolerable anxiety. Who could foresee the issue of this interview? I felt utterly unmanned—master neither of my deeds nor my words. I was only conscious of a rush of obscure and contradictory sentiments, which at the least touch would rise in revolt. Never as in that hour have I had so clear and desperate a perception of the discord that rent my soul, the irreconcilable elements in my nature, struggling, wrestling, in perpetual conflict, rebellious against every control. To the turmoil of my spirit was added a peculiar agitation of the senses produced by the cruel images which had tortured me that day without cessation. And now those feelings of kindness, of pity, and of strength, so essential to me when brought face to face with Giuliana, so necessary for sustaining me in my original plan of action, only moved feebly in me like dim vapours over a morass full of sullen pools and treacherous pitfalls.

It wanted but little to midnight when I left my room to go to Giuliana. Every sound had ceased. La Badiola was sunk in profound silence. I listened; and I almost seemed to hear through the stillness the calm breathing of my mother, my brother, my little girls—all so unconscious and so pure. I saw again the face of Maria asleep, as I had seen her the night before. The other faces, too, I saw, and on every one was an expression of peace and kindness and repose. My heart melted in sudden tenderness. The felicity, of which I had caught a glimpse yesterday before it vanished, flashed in splendour across my vision again. If nothing had happened, if I had remained in my ignorance and delusion, what a night this would have been! I would have gone to Giuliana as towards some divine joy. And what could then have been sweeter than this silence surrounding the agitation of my love?

I passed through the room in which, the evening before, I had received the unexpected revelation from my mother's lips. I heard the ticking of the clock that had marked the hour, and the regular swing of the pendulum only increased my distress. I do not know why, but I felt as if my agitation accorded with Giuliana's agitation, and I crossed the space that divided us with a responsive acceleration of the pulses. I did not knock at the door, but opened it at once, and walked in. Giuliana was there, standing before me, with one hand holding on to the corner of the table, motionless, rigid as a statue.

I can see it all still. Nothing escaped me then, nothing has grown dim since. The world of reality vanished completely, and nothing remained but our two selves, with hearts compressed, incapable of

uttering a syllable, and yet I, for one, singularly lucid, as if watching a scene in a theatre. A candle burned upon the table, adding another touch to the scenic effect; for the wavering flame seemed to shed around it that vague horror which lingers in the air after some grand gesture of despair or menace from one of the actors in a drama.

This strange impression was only dissipated when, at last, unable to bear the silence and Giuliana's statue-like immobility any longer, I offered the first words. My voice sounded quite different from what I expected; involuntarily it had become low and tremulous, almost timid.

'You were expecting me?'

'Yes,' she replied, without lifting her eyes.

Her arm, and the hand with which she held on to the table, were rigid as wood, and I feared that that frail support, on which she leaned her whole weight, would give way from moment to moment, and that she would crash down upon the floor.

'You know why I have come,' I continued very slowly, dragging the words out of my heart one by one.

She did not answer.

'It is true,' I went on; 'it is true—what I heard from my mother?'

No reply. She appeared to be collecting her forces. It was strange, but in that interval I did not think it absolutely impossible that she might answer —No.

Then the answer came, and I saw the words shape themselves on her blanched lips rather than that I heard them—'It is true.'

The blow came upon me with greater force, I

believe, than when I received it from my mother. I knew it all; I had lived in the certain knowledge of it for the last twenty-four hours, and yet this clear and precise confirmation of it struck me down as if the incommutable truth had been disclosed to me then for the first time.

'It is true!' I repeated, instinctively, speaking aloud to myself, and feeling something of the same sensation I should have had if I had found myself alive and conscious at the bottom of an abyss.

Giuliana lifted her eyes and fixed them on mine with a sort of convulsive effort. 'Tullio,' she said, 'listen to me.'

She gasped, and her voice seemed choked in her throat.

'Listen—I know what I have to do. I was resolved to do anything to spare you this hour, but fate has willed it that I should live till this hour and endure the most horrible thing, the thing of which I was so madly afraid—ah, you understand me—a thousand times more afraid than of death: Tullio, Tullio, your scorn——'

She caught her breath, and seemed almost to be suffocating. Her voice had become so strained that it gave me an impression of the physical laceration of her most secret fibres. I let myself sink into a chair beside the table, and dropping my head in my hands, waited for her to go on.

'I ought to have died before ever it could come to this. I ought to have died long ago! It would have been infinitely better never to have come here—that when you returned from Venice you had not found me. I should have been dead, and you would never have known this shameful thing; you would

have mourned for me, and perhaps have always adored me. I should perhaps have always been your great and absorbing, your *one* love, as you said yesterday. I was not afraid of death—you know that—I am not afraid now, but the thought of our children, of our mother, made me put off carrying it out from day to day. And it has been an agony, Tullio, one long, inhuman agony, in which I have consumed not one, but a thousand lives. And yet I am still alive!'

She paused a moment, then she resumed: 'How is it possible that with such wretched health as mine I should have so much strength to resist? My ill-luck pursues me in that too. You see, I thought when I consented to come here with you: "I am quite certain to get worse; as soon as I get there, I shall have to take to my bed, and I shall not get up again. It will seem as if I had died from natural causes. Tullio will never know, will never suspect anything. It will be all over——" And instead of that, here I am on my feet still, and you know all, and everything is lost, irreparably ruined!'

Her voice was very low and faltering, and yet more lacerating to my ear than a shrill reiterated scream. I pressed my hands to my temples, and felt them throb so violently, that I half shuddered, as if the arteries had been bare beneath my palms.

'My one absorbing thought was to hide the truth from you, not for my own sake, but for yours, for your peace of mind. You will never know what terrors have frozen me, what anguish I have gone through. From the day we came here up till yesterday, you have hoped, have dreamed, have been comparatively happy. But imagine what my life has been, with my secret, your mother always beside

me in this dear and peaceful house! Yesterday at Villalilla, among other things so sweet that they wrung my heart, you said to me, "You knew nothing, you noticed nothing——" Ah, that is not true! I knew it all, I guessed it all. And when I used to surprise a look of tenderness in your eyes, I felt my soul sink within me. Listen, Tullio. I am speaking the truth, the pure truth. I stand before you here, a dying woman—I cannot lie. You may believe what I tell you—I have no thought of exculpating or of defending myself. All is at an end now. But one thing I will say to you, and it is the truth. You know how I have loved you since the very first day we met. For years and years I have been devoted to you blindly; and not only in the years of happiness, but in those of my unhappiness too, when your love had grown cold. You know that, Tullio. You have always been able to do what you liked with me. You have always found me ready to be friend, sister, wife, lover to you—ready to make any sacrifice you might desire. But do not think, Tullio, do not for one moment think that I am reminding you of my long devotion in order to blame you—no—no. There is not one drop of bitterness in my heart against you, do you hear?—not a single drop. Only let me speak of my devotion and tenderness, my love which has *never had a break, never ceased*, do you hear?—*never, never ceased.* I do not think that my passion for you has ever been so intense as during these last few weeks. You told me so much yesterday. Ah, if I could tell you the life I have led during these last days! I knew it all, guessed it all—and yet I was obliged to treat you coldly. More than once, I was on the point of falling on your

breast and closing my eyes and letting you do what you would with me, I was so weak and tired of struggling against it. The other morning, that Saturday morning, when you came into my room with the flowers, I looked at you, and your face was the face I used to know—so bright and smiling and kind, with such beaming eyes. And when you showed me the scratches on your hands, a wild impulse came over me to seize your hands and kiss them. And what was it that gave me the strength to restrain myself? *I felt I was not worthy.* And in a flash I saw all the joy and happiness you were offering me with those flowers—and I was forced to renounce it all for ever. Ah, Tullio, my heart is proof against any strain if it could stand that and not break! My hold on life must be very tenacious.'

She uttered the last sentence with an indefinable tone between irony and anger. I did not dare to lift my face and look at her. Her words hurt me, caused me intolerable suffering, and yet I trembled when she made a pause. I was afraid that her strength would suddenly give out, and that she would not be able to continue; and I was waiting and hoping for more confessions from her lips, more glimpses into her soul.

'It was a great mistake,' she went on, 'a great mistake not to have died before your return from Venice. But my poor little girls—how could I leave them?'

She hesitated a moment.

'And you too—I might have done you harm, you might have felt some remorse, people would have blamed you. We could not have concealed it from our mother. She would have asked you what reason

I could have for wanting to die, and she would then have known the truth, which we have been able to keep from her up till now. Poor saint!'

Her voice grew faint and tremulous, choked with restrained tears. There was the same knot in my own throat.

'I thought of that. I also considered when you proposed bringing me here that I had become unworthy of her, unworthy of her kisses, unworthy of being called daughter by her. But you know how weak one is, how easily one abandons oneself to the pressure of circumstances. I had nothing more to hope for; I knew that there was no escape for me except in death; I knew that each day drew the cord tighter about me. And yet, I let the days go by, one by one, and could not make up my mind to it, although I had a sure means of death at hand.'

She stopped. Obeying a sudden impulse, I raised my eyes and looked at her fixedly. A great trembling fell upon her. The torture I imposed upon her by my gaze was so manifest, that I dropped my head again and resumed my former attitude.

All this time she had been standing, now she sat down.

There was an interval of silence.

'Do you think,' she asked at length, with painful timidity, 'do you consider that the fault is as great when the soul does not consent?'

The mention of the word *fault* was sufficient to stir up in me once more those dark and turgid depths which had grown calm; a sort of bitter regurgitation rose to my mouth; almost involuntarily I launched the sarcasm at her.

'Poor soul!' I said, with a cynical half smile.

A look of such intense pain came into Giuliana's face, that I was instantly stricken with the keenest remorse. I saw that I could not have wounded her more cruelly, and that to have used such a weapon as irony at that moment, and against that meek submissive creature, was to act like the vilest of the vile.

'Forgive me,' she said, with the look of one stricken unto death (and it really seemed to me that her eyes had the gentle, mournful, almost childlike expression I have sometimes seen in a wounded animal)—'forgive me. You too spoke of the soul yesterday. . . . No doubt you think now: "*These are the things which women say to get themselves forgiven.*" But I am not trying to get you to forgive me. I know that it is impossible that you should either forgive or forget. I know there is no escaping from that—you understand me? I only wanted to be forgiven for the kisses I have accepted from your mother . . .'

Her voice was low and humble, and yet more lacerating to the ear than a shrill and reiterated scream.

'There was so heavy a weight of grief upon my head, that not for myself, Tullio, but for that grief alone, I accepted your mother's kisses on my brow. And if I myself was unworthy of her kisses, that grief was worthy—you might forgive me.'

I had an impulse of kindness and pity, but I did not yield to it. I would not look her in the face; but my eyes involuntarily sought her person as if to discover proofs of the horrible fact, and I had to make the most violent effort to restrain myself from committing some mad deed.

'I put off the execution of my plan from day to

day; the thought of what it would mean to this household took away my courage; and thus all hope of being able to conceal the truth, of being able to spare you, vanished, because I had not been here a few days before your mother suspected my condition. You remember that day at the open window when I was so upset by the scent of the hyacinths? It was then that mama first noticed it. Imagine my terror! If I kill myself now, I thought, Tullio will know the truth from his mother. Who knows how far the consequences of my wrongdoing may reach! And day and night I racked my brain for some means of sparing you. When you asked me on Sunday if I would like to go to Villalilla on Tuesday, I consented without reflecting, abandoning myself to fate, trusting to chance. I was persuaded that that would be my last day on earth, and this certainty exalted me, acted on me like a kind of madness. Ah, Tullio, think of all you said to me yesterday, and then tell me if you can understand what my tortures must have been—can you?'

She bent forward as she spoke, as if to pierce my very soul with her anguished question.

'You had never spoken to me like that before, never,' she went on, wringing her interlocked hands. 'I had never heard just that tone in your voice. When you asked me, down there on the old seat, "*Is it perhaps too late?*" I looked at you, and your face frightened me. Could I answer, Yes, it is too late? Could I break your heart like that, at one blow? What would have become of us? And besides, I wanted to give myself up to one last moment of rapture; I was mad, I saw nothing but death and my passionate love.'

Her voice had become strangely hoarse. I looked at her now, and hardly recognised her, she was so changed. The lines of her face were contracted, her lower lip trembled violently, and her eyes burned with a feverish light.

'Do you blame me?' she asked in harsh and bitter tones; 'do you despise me for what I did yesterday?'

She covered her face with her hands. Then, after a pause, and with an indefinable accent of exhaustion, of passion, and of horror—an accent that had its origin in who knows what depth of her poor heart—she added, '*And it was only because of that* that I put off poisoning myself last night.'

Her hands fell in her lap. She resolutely shook off her weakness, and her voice grew firm again as she resumed: 'Fate had decided that I should live to see this hour. Fate willed it that you should know the truth from your mother—your mother! Last night when you came in here, you knew all, and you were silent, and before your mother you kissed the cheek I offered you. Only let me kiss your hands before I die—I ask for nothing more. I have waited for you now to obey you; I am ready to do anything you say—speak.'

'You must live,' was my answer.

'No, that is impossible, Tullio, impossible!' she exclaimed. 'Have you not thought *of what must happen if I live*?'

'Yes, I have thought of that. You must live.'

'Oh, horror!'

She shuddered violently with an instinctive movement of loathing, doubtless, against that *other life* which she bore within her.

'Listen, Tullio. You know the worst; my death

now would be useless for hiding from you my shame—you know all, and I am here before you, and we can still look at one another, can still speak! The question now is altogether different. I have no thought now of eluding your vigilance in order to kill myself; on the contrary, I want you to help me to accomplish it in the most natural manner, so that no suspicion may be aroused in this house. I have two poisons—morphia and a corrosive sublimate—but perhaps that will not do. Perhaps it is difficult to conceal death by poisoning. And my death must appear to be involuntary, the result of some accident. You understand? In that way we can gain our end—the secret will remain between us two.'

She was speaking rapidly now, with grave decision, as if giving me her reasons for persuading me to agreeing in some useful practical scheme instead of making a death-compact, of urging me to become her accomplice in the carrying out of an insensate plan. I let her go on. A sort of fascination held me spellbound, gazing at her, listening to a creature so fragile, so pale, so ill, and yet inspired by such vehement moral energy.

'Listen, Tullio. I have an idea. Federico told me about your foolhardiness to-day, the danger you ran to-day on the river-bank—he told me all about it. And I thought to myself in fear and trembling, Who knows what impulse of grief may not have driven him to risk his life in that way! And thinking it over, I seemed to understand—I saw it all clearly before me—all your sufferings in the future too, sufferings from which there was no escape, and that would increase from day to day—inconsolable, too heavy to be borne. Ah, Tullio surely you had

foreseen that, and felt you could not bear it. There is but one means of saving you, me, our souls, our love—yes, let me say it, *our love.* Let me still believe your words of yesterday, and let me repeat that I love you now as I never loved you before. But it is just for that very reason, just because we love each other, that I must go out of this life, that you must see me no more.'

The moral elevation which rang in her voice, which seemed to shine from her whole person at that moment, was quite extraordinary. A great thrill shot through me; a fleeting illusion took possession of my spirit. For a moment, I really fancied that my love and the love of this woman had risen to immeasurably lofty ideal heights, beyond the reach of human woes, untainted by sin, in all its pristine strength. But, of course, the inevitable reaction followed; that state of consciousness fell away from me, I knew it no more.

'Listen to me,' she went on, lowering her voice as if afraid of being overheard, 'I told Federico I had a great wish to see the forest and the charcoal-burners and all those places he had been speaking about. To-morrow morning he has to go to Casal Caldore again, so he could not come with us. We two will go alone. Federico said I could ride Favilla. When we are on the river's bank, I will do what you did this morning. There will be an accident. Federico told me it was impossible to be saved from the Assoro. Will you agree to that?'

Although her words were perfectly coherent, she seemed under the influence of a kind of delirium. A hectic flush glowed on her cheeks, and her eyes blazed strangely.

A vision of the sinister river passed rapidly before my eyes.

She leant towards me again. 'Do you agree to that?' she repeated.

I rose from my seat, and took her hands in mine. I wanted to calm her feverish excitement. A flood of pain and measureless pity came over me. My voice was tender and kind, and trembled with emotion.

'Poor Giuliana! Do not agitate yourself like this. You have suffered too severely; grief and trouble are unhinging your mind, poor darling! You must try to get up your courage, to be very brave; you must not think any more of all these things—think of the children. I have accepted this punishment—no doubt I deserved it for all the wrong I have done you. I have accepted it; I will bear it. But you must live. Promise me, Giuliana, for Maria and Natalia's sake, for the love you bear to my mother, for all I said to you yesterday—promise me that in no way whatever will you seek to compass your death.'

She kept her head bent. Then, suddenly releasing her hands, she seized mine and fell to kissing them wildly, and I felt upon my skin the warmth of her lips, the warmth of her tears. I tried to draw them away, but she slipped from her chair on to her knees before me, clinging to my hands, sobbing, lifting up her poor tear-drenched face to me, revealing by the spasmodic contraction of her mouth the unutterable pangs which wrung her very soul. I could not raise her; I could not speak. Suffocated by the rush of my emotions, overwhelmed by the sight of that sad convulsed mouth, bereft of all resentment as of all pride,

feeling nothing but the dull terror of life, sensible of nothing in the prostrate woman and in myself but the suffering, the eternal misery of humanity, the curse of inevitable transgressions, the burden of the flesh, the horror of fatality indelibly graven in the very roots of our being, all the corporeal sadness of our love, I too fell upon my knees from an instinctive longing to prostrate myself, to make myself equal with the unhappy creature who was suffering, and who caused me to suffer with her. I too broke into sobs. And once again, after so long, we mingled our tears that were, alas! so scalding and yet so powerless to alter our destiny.

CHAPTER XVII

How impossible it is to render in words the sense of arid desolation and stupor which supervenes in one after a useless burst of tears, after an ineffectual paroxysm of despair! Tears are but a fleeting form of expression, every crisis must pass, every excess is necessarily brief; and afterwards a man finds himself exhausted, desiccated so to speak, more than ever convinced of his utter impotence, standing dumbfounded and dejected before the impossible reality.

I was the first to cease weeping and regain consciousness of Giuliana's and my own attitude and of our surroundings. We were still upon our knees, and Giuliana was still shaken with sobs. The candle burned upon the table, the flame bending now and then as if under a breath. Through the silence my ear caught the faint ticking of a clock somewhere in the room. Life was flowing on, time was flying. My soul was void and alone.

The vehemence of our sentiment past, the intoxication of our grief once over, our attitude had no longer any significance, had lost its *raison-d'être*. I must get up, must raise Giuliana, must say something to her, this scene must come to a definite close. But I felt a strange reluctance to make a beginning; I did not feel capable of the smallest effort, physical

or mental. It annoyed me to find myself in that situation, in this difficulty, constrained to follow it up in any way. And a kind of dull resentment began to stir in me against Giuliana.

I rose to my feet and helped her to do the same. Each sob which broke from her every now and then increased this unaccountable resentment of mine.

It is true, then, that some small portion of dislike is mixed with every sentiment which unites two human beings—that this inevitable dislike taints our tenderest raptures, our best impulses? Every beautiful quality of the soul bears in it a latent germ of corruption, and is bound to decay.

'Calm yourself, Giuliana,' I said (and I greatly feared that my voice might not be sufficiently gentle), 'you have need now of all your strength. Come and sit down here. Would you like a little water? Shall I get your smelling-salts? Tell me what you would like.'

'A little water, please; you will find it in the alcove, on the bed-table.'

Her voice was still broken and tearful; she was wiping her face with her handkerchief as she sat on a low couch opposite to a great looking-glass. Her sobs had not quite ceased.

I went into the alcove for the glass of water. The bed was already prepared, and a corner of the bed-clothes turned back. I was conscious of the faint scent of violets and orris root I knew so well, and it moved me profoundly. I hastily poured out the water and returned to Giuliana.

She drank a mouthful or two slowly, while I stood before her and watched the movement of her lips.

'Thanks, Tullio,' she said, and she handed me

back the glass only half emptied. As I was thirsty, I drank the rest of the water. This little unpremeditated act did much to increase my perturbation. I seated myself on the couch a little way from her, and we were both silent, absorbed in our own thoughts.

The couch and our two figures were reflected in the mirror opposite. Without looking at each other, we could see our faces, though indistinctly, because of the meagre and flickering light. I gazed fixedly into the vague depths of the mirror at Giuliana's figure, which gradually assumed an aspect of mystery, the perturbing fascination of certain feminine portraits obscured by time, the intense fictitious life of figures born of an hallucination. And by degrees this distant image seemed to me more living than the real person, by degrees I saw in that image the woman of my caresses, the woman of passion, the faithless one.

I closed my eyes. The Other suddenly appeared before me.

'All this time,' my mind went on, 'she has never alluded directly to her fall, to the circumstances of it. Only one significant phrase has she uttered—*Do you think the fault is as grave when the soul does not consent?*—A mere phrase, however! And what did she mean me to understand by it? It is simply one of those subtle distinctions which have ever been used to excuse and extenuate any treachery, any kind of infamy. But, after all, what sort of relations have existed between her and Filippo Arborio beyond the undeniable carnal ones? And under what circumstances did she surrender herself?' Fierce curiosity assailed me. Suggestions offered them-

selves to me out of my own experiences. Images formed, changed, succeeded one another rapidly and clearly. I saw Giuliana as I had seen her on that day long ago, sitting in the embrasure of the window, alone, a book upon her knee, all languid and pale, in the attitude of one who is on the point of swooning, while an indefinable agitation as of things violently suppressed passed in her dilated eyes. Had she been surprised by him during one of these fits of languor, in my own house, and had suffered the violation in a sort of unconsciousness, awakening from which she had been overwhelmed with horror and disgust, and had driven him away and never seen him again?—Then I saw her standing before her looking-glass that morning in November, saw her graceful attitude as she fastened her veil, the colour of her dress, and heard her light step upon the pavement below 'on the sunny side of the street.' Had she gone to keep a tryst with him that morning?

I suffered nameless tortures. The mad thirst for definite knowledge wrung my soul; my physical imaginings exasperated me beyond endurance; my rancour against Giuliana became ever more bitter; and my jealousy such, that I felt that my only escape from some odious impulse was in flight. And yet my will seemed stricken with paralysis; I was not master of my actions. I sat there, held in check by two conflicting forces—a repulsion and an attraction that were both purely physical.

From the moment that the Other appeared, he had remained pertinaciously before me. Was it Filippo Arborio? Had I guessed aright? Could I be mistaken?

I turned suddenly to Giuliana. She was looking

at me, and the question I was on the point of asking her stuck in my throat. I cast down my eyes and bent my head; then, with the same spasmodic effort with which I should have torn a piece of living flesh from my body, I asked—

'The name of *that man*?'

My voice was trembling and hoarse; it hurt me.

At this unexpected question Giuliana started violently, but she did not answer.

'You are silent?' I persisted, forcing back the anger that was beginning to master me; that blind rage which, in the preceding night, in the alcove, had swept over my spirit like a devastating blast.

'Oh, my God!' she moaned distractedly, and threw herself down upon the couch, hiding her face in the cushions. 'Oh, my God, my God!'

But I was determined to know; I was determined to drag the confession from her at all costs.

'You remember,' I continued, 'you remember that morning early in November when I came into your room unexpectedly? You remember? I don't know why I came—perhaps because you were singing. You were singing the air from Orfeo; you were almost ready to go out. I saw a book on your writing-table; I opened it and read a dedication on the fly-leaf. It was a novel: *The Secret*—you remember?'

She lay motionless among the cushions; she did not speak. I leaned over her. I was shivering as one does before an attack of fever.

'Is it he?' I whispered.

She did not answer, but she raised herself with a sudden desperate energy. She seemed crazed. She

made as if she would have thrown herself upon me, and then drew back.

'Have mercy! Have mercy!' she broke out. 'Let me die! The torture you are making me suffer now is worse than any death. I have borne all—I shall be able to bear all—but not that, not that. If I live, it will mean hourly martyrdom for both of us; each day will be more awful than the last. And you will hate me; all your hatred will be poured out upon me. I know it, I know it. Already I hear it in your voice. Have pity on me! Let me die before it comes to that!'

She seemed quite distraught. She had a frantic impulse to clutch hold of me, and yet dared not, and so sat miserably clasping and unclasping her hands to keep them off me, while violent tremors shook her from head to foot.

I grasped her by the arm and drew her towards me. 'Then I am never to know anything?' I said through my clenched teeth, grown crazed as she was, impelled by an instinct of cruelty which tightened my rude grip upon her arm.

'I love you, I have always loved you—have always been yours and yours alone, excepting for that one hellish minute of weakness—you hear?—*one minute of weakness.* And that is the truth. Can you not feel that I am speaking the truth?'

She fell back upon the cushions, and my lips suffocated her cry.

CHAPTER XVIII

SURELY the first suggestion of my crime came to me then?

I thought of Giuliana's bitter words, 'I have a very tenacious hold on life.' But it was not the tenacity of her life I was thinking of, but that of the *other life* she bore within her, and against which I was so exasperated, against which I now began to plot.

My hostility grew ever keener. I pictured our future—divined it with a sort of clairvoyance. Giuliana would bring into the world a boy, the heir to our ancient name. The son who was not mine would grow and flourish; would usurp the love of my mother and my brother; would be cherished, adored, preferred to Maria and Natalia, who were flesh of my flesh. The force of habit would deaden Giuliana's remorse, and she would abandon herself without reserve to her maternal sentiments. And the boy, who was no son of mine, would grow up protected by her and by her assiduous care; would grow robust and handsome; would become self-willed as a little despot, lord it over my whole house. By degrees these visions would particularise themselves. Certain fantastic scenes stood out and assumed the activity of real life. The figure of the child varied infinitely; its actions, its gestures were ever changing. Now, I

would imagine it slender, pallid, taciturn, with a large heavy head drooping on its breast; now, all round and rosy, gay, talkative, full of pretty tricks and blandishments, particularly loving towards me, sweet-tempered and good; or, on the contrary, it would be all nerves, bilious, a little feline, sharp-witted and full of malevolent instincts, harsh to his sisters, cruel to animals, incapable of affection, impervious to discipline. Little by little, this last conception overruled the others and obliterated them permanently, fixed itself as a definite type, was inspired with intense fictitious life, and finally adopted a name—the name already determined upon for the possible heir, the name of my father—Raimondo.

The little phantasm was a direct emanation of my hatred, and had the same enmity towards me as I towards him, an adversary with whom I was preparing to fight. He was my victim, and I was his. I could not flee from him, nor he from me. We both were captives within an iron circle.

His eyes were grey like those of Filippo Arborio. Among the varying expressions of his gaze, one affected me most strongly in an imagined scene, which would repeat itself from time to time. It was this—I enter unsuspectingly into a room drowned in shadow, full of a singular silence. I imagine myself to be alone there. Suddenly turning down, I become aware of the presence of Raimondo with his grey, malevolent eyes fixed upon me. I am instantly assailed by so strong a temptation to crime, that, lest I should throw myself upon the accursed little creature, I take refuge in flight.

CHAPTER XIX

THE compact between me and Giuliana was therefore concluded—she was to live. We both continued our life of dissimulation. Like the drunkards, we led a double existence: one tranquil, all made up of gentleness, of filial tenderness, of pure affections and benign actions; the other agitated, feverish, turbid, uncertain, without hope, dominated by a fixed idea, for ever pursued by a threatening calamity, rushing on towards an unknown catastrophe.

I had, it is true, certain rare moments in which my spirit, escaping from the onslaught of all these sinister things, freeing itself from the evil which stretched out a thousand hands to clutch it, took a great upward flight towards those lofty ideal heights of which I had now and then had a glimpse. I recalled my brother's singular remark to me in the forest by the Assoro while he referred to Giovanni di Scordio, '*You will do well, Tullio, not to forget that smile.*' And that smile on the old man's withered lips seemed to me to have a profound significance, to become extraordinarily luminous, uplifted me like the revelation of a divine truth.

Now, in these rare moments, too, another smile would come before me—Giuliana's as she lay back weakly on her pillows on that distant quiet afternoon when I had intoxicated the poor convalescent with a

deceptive prospect of rapture. The meek yet terrible question which Andreas Bolkonsky read upon the dead face of the Princess Lisa I now read continually on the living face of my wife. What have you brought me to? No reproach had ever issued from her lips; never, in order to lessen the gravity of her sin, had she cast in my face one of my numerous infamies; she had bowed her meek head before her torturer, not one drop of bitterness had mingled in her words; and nevertheless, her eyes repeated that question to me, What have you brought me to?

A strange sacrificial ardour would then flame up in me, urging me to embrace my cross. The magnitude of the expiation seemed to me worthy of my courage. I felt myself to be possessed of a superabundance of strength, an heroic spirit, an enlightened mind. Going to my stricken *sister*, I would think to myself, 'I shall find some word of loving-kindness to console her, some expression of brotherly sympathy to mitigate her woes, that will lift up her head.' But arrived in her presence, I had not a word to say; my lips seemed infrangibly sealed, my whole nature under an evil spell. All that inner light went out, as if extinguished by an icy breath coming from I knew not where. And in the darkness the dull anger which I knew so well, and which I could not repress, began to stir vaguely.

It was a sure indication of one of my fits of fury. Stammering some wild excuse, avoiding Giuliana's eye, I would seek security in flight.

CHAPTER XX

HER powers of dissimulation in the presence of the others were almost incredible. She actually succeeded in smiling! My known fears for her health were sufficient excuse for the occasional fits of dejection which I was powerless to conceal; which fears being communicated to my mother and brother, had the result that Giuliana's expectations were not treated in the same festive spirit as usual on former occasions, any allusion even being avoided. It was a mercy!

But presently, Dr. Vebesti arrived at La Badiola. His visit was reassuring. He found Giuliana greatly run down in health, observed some derangement of the nervous system, the blood much impoverished, and a general disturbance of the digestive organs; but otherwise all was proceeding normally, and—the general condition of the patient being meanwhile improved—no danger was to be apprehended finally. For the rest, he relied greatly on Giuliana's exceptional constitution, which had given extraordinary proof of resistance on past occasions. He prescribed a course of hygienic treatment and of diet calculated to strengthen her, approved of her sojourn in the country, and laid particular stress on regular hours, moderate exercise, and an easy mind.

'I count specially on you,' he said to me very earnestly.

At heart I was disappointed. I had rested my last hope of salvation on him, and now that was gone too! Before he came I had hoped he would say that in order to save the mother's life the child must be sacrificed. Giuliana would be safe, would recover; I too would be saved, would feel that I had taken a new lease of life. I might almost forget, or at least become resigned. Time heals so many wounds, and work consoles so many griefs. In time I might regain my peace of mind, amend my ways, follow my brother's example, become a Man, live for others, embrace the new faith. Out of my very troubles I might recover my lost self-respect. The man to whom it is given to suffer more than others is also worthy to suffer more than others. Was that not one of the texts out of my brother's gospel? There are, therefore, grades of promotion in sorrow. Giovanni di Scordio, for example, is one of the elect. He who possesses such a smile, possesses a divine gift. Could I not merit such a gift? Thus I had hoped and mused. For all my expiatory fervour, I hoped for a diminution of my pains!

In very truth, though I desired to regenerate myself through suffering, I was afraid of it—was desperately afraid of facing real pain. My soul was faint within me. I had caught a glimpse of the straight path of salvation, had been agitated by Christian aspirations, and now I turned aside to a road that led to certain destruction. Speaking to the doctor, showing some incredulity as to his reassuring forecast, confessing my own anxiety, I managed to hint at my proposition. I gave him to

understand that I wished to ensure Giuliana against danger, let it cost what it might; and that, if it were necessary, I would renounce my hopes of a third child without the smallest regret. I begged him not to conceal anything from me.

He reassured me heartily. He added that even if the worst came to the worst, he would not resort to mechanical measures, as it might easily prove fatal to Giuliana in her present low state. He repeated that the chief thing to be considered was the improvement of the system in general, so that the patient might face her hour of trial with strength and confidence restored.

'I fancy your wife is particularly in want of moral consolation. I am an old friend. I know that she has suffered greatly. You can do much towards raising her spirits.'

CHAPTER XXI

RELIEVED by the doctor's verdict, my mother redoubled her affectionate solicitude towards Giuliana, and made no secret of her tender dreams and presentiments. She expected a grandson, a little Raimondo. This time she was *certain* of it.

My brother too expected Raimondo. Maria and Natalia overwhelmed me, their mother, their grandmother, with pretty innocent questions about the future playmate.

And thus with fond presages, with happy auguries, with loving hopes, they heralded the advent of the unknown and, as yet, formless being.

One day Giuliana and I were left alone sitting under the elms. My mother had just left us. During her affectionate discourses she had spoken of Raimondo, had even used the diminutive Mondino, recalling distant memories of my dead father. Giuliana and I managed to smile; she imagined that her dreams and hopes were also ours. And she had left us to ourselves that we might continue our dream!

It was the hour following the sunset; the air was bright and calm. The leaves hung motionless above our heads. Now and then a band of swallows would cleave the air with a rush of wings and a hubbub of shrill cries as at Villalilla.

We followed the beloved form with our eyes until she disappeared; then we turned and looked at one another in silence and consternation. Oppressed by the immensity of our woe, neither broke the silence for some time, and I felt as if Giuliana and I were isolated utterly from mankind, alone in a world of our own. It was not an illusory sensation, but real and profound. I shuddered, and lifted my eyes again to my companion's face, and saw in it the reflection of my own agony, and divined from that the aspect I must present to her.

After an interval, during which we had both tried to gauge the depth of our misery and found no end to it, she said in a low voice—

'Have you thought that this may go on through our whole life?'

I did not open my lips, but the answer came resolutely within me, 'No, it will not go on.'

'Remember,' she continued, 'that a word from you can stop the whole thing—can make you free. I am ready. Remember that.'

Still I did not speak, but I thought to myself, 'It is not you who must die.'

Again she resumed in a voice that trembled with despairing fondness: 'I cannot comfort you! There is no comfort either for you or for me—nor ever can be. Have you thought of how there will always be *some one* between us two? If the prayers of your mother are heard—think of it! think of it!'

But my soul was quivering under the lash of a single sinister thought.

'They all love it already,' I said.

I hesitated and darted a look at Giuliana. Dropping my eyes again, and bending my head low, I

asked her, in a voice that seemed to die upon my lips, 'Do you love it?'

'Ah, how can you ask me such a question?'

But I could not help insisting, although I suffered physically as if I had put my finger in an open wound.

'Do you love it?'

'No, no; I loathe it!'

I had an instinctive throb of joy, as if by this confession I had obtained her consent and almost her complicity to my secret thought. But had she answered the truth? Or had she lied out of pity for me?

A brutal desire to insist further, to force her into a full confession, came over me, but the sight of her face prevented me. Besides which, I felt softened towards her, not to say grateful. It seemed to me that the loathing to which she had shudderingly confessed separated her in some sort from the creature she bore within her, and brought her nearer to me; and I felt the desire to make her understand these things, to increase her aversion for that creature as for an enemy irreconcilable to both of us.

I took her hand. 'You relieve me somewhat,' I said, 'and I am grateful to you. You understand——' and I sought to mask my criminal intention under a show of Christian hope. 'Providence is kind—who knows. There may be some loophole of escape for us. You know what I mean. There is no saying! We must pray to God.'

That was an augury of death to the child; it was equivalent to a vow; and by inducing Giuliana to pray that God would grant it, I prepared her for the dread event and drew her into a kind of spiritual

complicity. For I thought: 'After these words of mine, the suggestion of the deed may gradually enter into her so strongly as at last to carry her away. Exalted by the idea of freeing me from this shame and horror, she might easily convince herself of the terrible necessity, and in an impulse of fierce energy accomplish the extreme sacrifice. Has she not just repeated her assertion that she was ready to die? Her death would, of course, imply the death of the child. She is therefore not deterred by any religious prejudice, by fear of sinning. But she is convinced that her existence is of use in the world, is necessary to the persons who love her and whom she loves; also, she is convinced that the existence of the child who is not mine would render our lives insupportable. She knows that we may be re-united; that we may yet find some consolation in forgiveness and oblivion; that we may look forward to our wounds being healed by time, as long as there is no intruder between us. Let her consider these questions, and a useless vow, an ineffectual prayer may at once be transformed into a resolve and a deed.' Thus I mused; and she too sat silent and pensive, her head bent, holding one of my hands in hers, while the shadow of the great elms fell over us.

Of what was she thinking? Did some shadow fall upon her other than that of the evening?

I saw Raimondo before me—not the perverse and cunning boy with the grey eyes, but as a tiny soft pink creature whom the slightest pressure could deprive of its feeble, feeble breath.

The first stroke of the Angelus quivered through the still air. Giuliana withdrew her hand from mine and made the sign of the cross.

CHAPTER XXII

THE fourth month passed, and the fifth, and Giuliana's appearance altered rapidly. She was as humiliated by it before me as if suffering from some hideous deformity.

I felt that I was at the end of my resources, incapable any longer of dragging out my miserable existence. Each morning, when I awoke after unrefreshing slumber, it was as though some one offered me a deep cup and said : 'If you would drink, if you would live to-day, you must drain your heart's blood into this cup, even to the last drop.' An indescribable shudder of repugnance, of disgust, shook me to the depths of my being at each awakening. And yet, I had to live!

The days crawled past with cruel slowness. Time no longer flowed; it dropped thick and heavy.

I had the whole summer still before me, and part of the autumn—an eternity. I forced myself to accompany my brother, to help him in the great agrarian work he had undertaken, seeking to inflame my feeble faith by the steady glow of his. For whole days together I was on horseback like a drover; I tired myself out with manual labour, some easy and monotonous task; I tried to blunt the keen edge of my mind by daily contact with the sons of the soil, simple, straightforward men, in whom a few

moral laws, handed down from father to son, were carried out as naturally as were the functions of the body. More than once, I visited Giovanni di Scordio, the solitary saint, with the desire to hear his voice, to question him as to his misfortunes, to see once more his mournful eyes and his gentle smile. But he was taciturn and a little shy with me, giving but a few vague words in reply; not liking to talk about himself, or to complain, or even to interrupt the work upon which he was engaged. His thin, bony, sunburnt hands never ceased working, probably did not know what it was to be tired.

One day I exclaimed, 'But will you never give your hands a rest?'

The sorely tried man looked at them with a smile, first the back, then the palms, turning them over in the sunshine. That meditative gaze, that smile, that gesture conferred a sovereign dignity upon those toil-worn hands. Hardened in the labour of the fields, sanctified by the good they had sown, by the mighty work in which they had taken part, these hands were now worthy to bear the palm.

The old man crossed them on his breast and answered, still smiling—

'Very soon, sir, if God wills. When they lie like this in my coffin—then they can rest.'

CHAPTER XXIII

BUT every remedy was fruitless. My work neither cheered nor comforted me—for the very good reason that it was excessive, unequal, ill regulated, feverish, and frequently interrupted by periods of invincible inertia, of arid depression.

'But this is not carrying out my Rule of Life,' my brother admonished. 'In one week you use up the energy of seven months, and then relapse into complete idleness, only to throw yourself once more frantically into work—that is not the way to live. Our work must be carried on calmly, concordantly, harmoniously, if it is to be efficacious. Do you hear? We must draw up a set of methodical rules for ourselves. But, of course, yours is the defect of all beginners—an excess of zeal. You will calm down presently.'

Another time he observed to me: 'You have not found your balance yet. You do not yet feel *terra firma* under your feet. Never fear; sooner or later, you will come to see the true law that should govern your life. Your eyes will be opened to it quite suddenly and unexpectedly when the right time comes.'

Again he said: 'This time, you may be sure, Giuliana will present you with an heir—Raimondo. I have already thought of a godfather for him. Your

son ought to be presented for baptism by Giovanni di Scordio. You could not find a more worthy godfather. Giovanni will inculcate goodness and strength of purpose into him. As soon as Raimondo can understand, we will tell him all about that fine old man. And your son shall become what we have never been able or known how to be.'

He constantly returned to this subject; Raimondo's name was for ever on his lips; he prophesied that the child would grow up to be the ideal human type he had long dreamed of—the Example. And he did not know that his every word was a sword-thrust in my heart, rendering my hatred more bitter, my despair more vehement than before.

All unconsciously my whole family combined to outdo one another in wounding me. Whenever I approached one of them, it was with such fear and trembling as I should have felt if I had found myself beside a person who carried in his hand a terrible weapon, unconscious of its deadly powers. I was in constant fear of a blow, and sought to find some slight relief in solitude, as far away from the others as possible. But here I only found myself face to face with my worst enemy—myself.

I felt that secretly I was dying by inches; that my life was slowly evaporating at every pore. Suffering came back upon me at times equal to the darkest periods of the now remote past. At times I was conscious of nothing but my bare existence, isolated among the phantoms of a dead world.

This would be followed by a rush of irony, of sarcasm against myself, a fierce desire to demolish, to pull down everything about me, impious derision against High Heaven, a wild ferment of the foulest

dregs of my nature. I seemed no longer to know what forbearance, pity, affection, or kindness was. All the fountains of goodness within me closed, dried up, as if by some malefic spell. In Giuliana I saw nothing but the brutal fact—the result of her faithlessness; in myself I saw only the gulled husband, the ridiculous hero of a silly sentimental novel. My own bitter derision spared not one of my actions, not one of Giuliana's. The tragedy was changed into dull, coarse comedy. Nothing withheld me; every bond was broken; and I thought to myself: 'Why stay on here to play so sorry a part? I shall go—go back to the world, to my former life of liberty and licence. I can drown my griefs in pleasure; can go to the devil my own way. What does it matter? I will not be anything but what I am—a beast wallowing in the mire. Faugh!'

CHAPTER XXIV

DURING one of these outbursts I resolved to leave La Badiola and go to Rome in search of distraction.

A pretext offered itself easily; for, not having expected so long an absence, we had left our house under provisional conditions. It was necessary, therefore, to make a good many arrangements, so that our stay might be prolonged indefinitely.

Accordingly I announced my intended departure, and fully explained its necessity to my mother, my brother, and Giuliana, promising to complete my business in a few days.

The evening before I left, when, at a late hour, I had finished my packing, and was just closing my valise, a knock came to the door.

'Come in!' I cried.

Giuliana entered. 'You?' I exclaimed in surprise, and hastened to meet her.

She was a little out of breath from coming upstairs. I made her sit down, and offered her a cup of cold tea, with a thin slice of lemon in it, a beverage she was very fond of, and which had been put ready for me. She scarcely touched it with her lips, and then handed it back to me. Her eyes betrayed her nervous agitation.

At last she said timidly, 'So you are going?'

'Yes,' I answered, 'to-morrow morning, as you know.'

There ensued a long interval of silence. A delicious freshness came in through the open windows; the full moon streamed down upon the window-sills; the chorus of the grasshoppers, like the sound of a rather harsh flute, came up out of the distance.

'When will you come back? Tell me the truth,' she suddenly asked me in an agitated voice.

'*I do not know*,' I replied.

There was another pause. The light breeze shook the curtains from time to time. Every breath that entered the room bore on its wings the glamour of the summer night.

'Then you abandon me?'

The despondency of her tone was so profound, that, in a moment, my hardened heart melted, and I was filled with pity and remorse.

'No, Giuliana,' I answered, 'do not fear. But I must have a little respite. I can't go on like this. I must have breathing space.'

'You are quite right,' was her reply.

'I fully believe that I shall come back soon, as I promised. I will write to you. And you too—perhaps you will find some relief in not seeing me suffer.'

'Nothing can ever give me relief,' she said, suppressed tears quivering in her voice. Suddenly she turned upon me, and in tones of poignant anguish —'Tullio, Tullio,' she cried, 'tell me the truth—do you hate me? Tell me the truth!'

Her eyes interrogated me even more anxiously than her words. For a moment her very soul seemed to gaze at me. And those poor dilated eyes, that pale brow, that quivering mouth, the contrast of

that wasted suffering face, with the ignominious deformity of her figure, those hands, those thin meek hands stretched out to me in supplication, affected me more grievously than ever before, and filled me with tender compassion.

'Trust me, Giuliana, trust me always. I have not the faintest trace of ill-feeling towards you—I never shall have. I never forget that I owe you a return; I forget nothing. Have I not given you proofs of that? Take courage. Think now only of how you can best *free yourself*. After that—who knows! But come what may, I will never fail you, Giuliana. Let me go now. A few days' absence may do me good. I shall return calmer. We shall have need of all our courage later on; you will want all the help I can give you.'

'Thank you,' she said; 'do with me what you think best.'

A human song rose through the night, drowning the harsh notes of the sylvan flute, threshers perhaps in some distant shed under the moon.

'Hark!' I said.

We listened. The wandering breeze played about us. All the glamour of the summer night streamed in and swelled our hearts.

'Shall we go out and sit on the balcony?' I asked her gently.

She assented and rose, and we passed into the next room, where there was no light but that of the full moon. A flood of pure silver poured over the floor. Through this flood she walked before me, to reach the balcony, and I could see her shapeless shadow outlined upon the brightness.

Ah, where was the slender graceful creature I

would fain have clasped in my arms? Where the beloved woman I had found again under the blossoming lilacs one April morning? In one instant all my regrets, desires, despair rushed back upon my heart.

Giuliana sat down and leaned her head against the iron railing. In that full light her face was whiter than anything about us, whiter than the wall. Her eyes were half closed, and her long lashes cast a shadow on her cheeks that affected me more than a glance.

There was nothing for me to say.

I turned towards the valley leaning on the railing, and clenching my hands on the cold iron. Below me I saw a vast shadowy mass in which I could distinguish nothing but the glitter of the Assoro. The song was borne fitfully to us on the wings of the breeze, and in the pauses one heard again the shrill harsh chorus of the grasshoppers. No night had ever seemed to me so full of sweetness and of terror. And from the uttermost depths of my soul there broke a cry, piercing though inaudible, a cry of yearning after my lost happiness.

CHAPTER XXV

No sooner had I arrived in Rome than I regretted having come. I found the city stiflingly hot, and almost deserted; it appalled and confused me. My house was silent as the tomb, and all the things in it I knew so well looked strange and different. I felt myself utterly alone, in an awful solitude, and yet I would not seek out my friends, did not want to remember nor be remembered by any one. I was solely concerned in hunting up one man, spurred on by my implacable hatred; that man was Filippo Arborio.

I hoped to encounter him in some public place, and went to the restaurant I knew he frequented. There I lay in wait for him a whole evening, pondering the manner in which I would insult him. The entrance of each new-comer set my heart beating afresh, but he did not appear. I questioned the waiters; they had not seen him for a long time.

I next paid a visit to the fencing-school. The hall was empty, immersed in the faint green shadow produced by the closed venetian blinds and the atmosphere full of the peculiar smell of water sprinkled over a wood floor. The deserted fencing-master received me with effusive delight. I listened attentively to his minute account of the triumphs achieved by his pupils in the last contests; I then asked for

news of various friends who frequented the school; finally, I mentioned Filippo Arborio.

'He has not been in Rome for four or five months,' was the reply. 'I did hear that he was ill of some serious nervous affection, and not likely to recover. Count Galiffa told me, but I know nothing further.'

'He was far from strong, anyhow,' continued the master. 'He took very few lessons here from me—he was afraid of the foils; he could not bear to see the point before his eyes——'

'Is Galiffa still in Rome?' I asked.

'No, in Rimini.'

After a few minutes I took leave of him.

This totally unexpected news stunned me. 'If it were only true!' I thought to myself. And I could not refrain from hoping that it was a question of one of those terrible affections of the spinal cord or of the brain which bring a man to the lowest degradations, to idiocy, to the most miserable forms of madness, and finally to death. The ideas gathered from scientific books, the recollection of a visit once paid to a mad person, and more especially the impression left on me by a particular case, that of poor Spinelli, revolved rapidly in my mind. I had a distinct vision of my poor friend Spinelli seated in a great red leather arm-chair; his face the colour of clay, and all its lines loosened, unstrung; his mouth open; moping and mowing incomprehensibly. Again I saw the gesture with which he continually wiped away the water that ran out of the corners of his mouth, and the thin patient face of the Sister who tied a napkin round his neck and fed him like a child.

'It would be entirely to my advantage,' I went on.

'If I had a duel with so celebrated an adversary, if I wounded him seriously or killed him, the fact could by no possibility be kept secret; it would be in every mouth, commented upon by every newspaper, and then the true cause of the duel would probably leak out! This providential illness saves me from all danger of annoyance or gossip. I may well renounce my sanguinary designs or a punishment inflicted by my hand (and can I be certain of the issue?) when I know that my enemy is paralysed, is reduced to impotence by the hand of Heaven. But is it true—may it not be merely a passing illness?' I had a bright idea. Jumping into a cab, I drove to his publisher's shop.

On first entering I could distinguish nothing, my eyes were dazzled by the glare outside, but a nasal voice with an unfamiliar accent at once addressed me.

'The signore wishes——?'

Behind the counter stood a man of indefinite age, pasty-faced, thin, unwashed, a kind of albino. I mentioned the names of certain books, and bought one or two of them. I then asked for Arborio's last novel. The albino handed me *The Secret*. He then revealed himself as a fanatical admirer of the novelist.

'Is this the latest?'

'Yes. We have announced a new one for some months past—*Turris eburnea!*'

'Ah—*Turris eburnea!*' My heart gave a great throb.

'But I hardly think we shall be able to publish it.'

'Why not?'

'The novelist is very ill.'

'Indeed! What of?'

'Creeping paralysis,' returned the albino, separating the terrible words from one another with a certain affectation of scientific knowledge.

'Ah, Giulio Spinelli's ailment! A serious matter, then?'

'Extremely serious,' observed the albino sententiously. 'You know, of course, that that kind of paralysis cannot be arrested.'

'But it has only just set in, I presume?'

'Quite so, but there can be no doubt as to the nature of the disease. The last time he was here I heard him speak; even then he had great difficulty in pronouncing certain words.'

'Ah, you heard him?'

'Yes, sir. His speech was already uncertain, a little shaky over some words——'

I encouraged the albino by the extreme, not to say admiring, attention I paid to his remarks. I think he was quite ready to enumerate for me the consonants against which the tongue of the illustrious novelist had tripped.

'And where is he now?'

'At Naples. The doctors have ordered him a course of electricity!'

'Ah, indeed—a course of electricity!' I repeated with an ingenious assumption of ignorance and surprise, wishing to flatter the albino's vanity and draw further details from him.

A thread of fresh air wafted through the long, narrow, passage-like shop. The light was subdued. A clerk slumbered peacefully on a chair, his chin on his breast, in the shadow of a terrestrial globe. No one entered the shop. It was pleasant enough in that all-pervading stillness to hear asserted with so

much assurance that the man I loathed and detested was incurably afflicted.

'Then the doctors have some hope of saving him?' I continued, in order to draw the albino out.

'Impossible.'

'Let us hope that it may be possible, for the glory of the literary world——'

'Impossible.'

'But I fancy there have been cases in which creeping paralysis was cured?'

'No, sir, no. He may live for two, three, four years; but get better—never!'

'And yet, I can't help thinking——'

I cannot imagine how I came to be light-hearted enough to play thus with my informant; how I could take such curious pleasure in tasting my cruel sentiment. There is no denying it—I was enjoying myself. Nettled by my contradiction, the albino said not another word, but proceeded to mount some steps leaning against a high book-shelf. As he clambered up, sinuous and agile, he reminded me of one of those mangy tom-cats that skulk about the tiles at night. On the way he knocked his head against a string fastened across a corner of the shop for the flies to rest on. A cloud of them instantly surrounded him with a chorus of buzzing. He descended with a volume in his hand, the authority to be quoted for his fatal verdict.

He showed me the title-page. It was a treatise on certain special pathological subjects.

'Listen to this now.'

He turned over the pages. The volume being uncut, he held two pages apart with his finger, and peering in with his colourless eyes, he read through

the opening: *The prognosis of progressive paralysis is unfavourable to recovery.* 'Will that persuade you?' he added.

'Yes. But what a pity! Such a rare intellect!'

The flies would not settle again. They kept up a continuous irritating buzz and assailed me, the albino, the sleeping clerk.

'How old *was* he?' I asked, involuntarily employing the past tense as if speaking of a person deceased.

'Who, sir?'

'Filippo Arborio.'

'Five-and-thirty, I think.'

'Not more than that!'

I felt a strange desire to laugh, a childish impulse to burst out laughing in the albino's face and leave him standing stupefied. It was a singular sense of excitement, a little hysterical no doubt, which I had never experienced before, and cannot clearly describe —something approaching to that uncontrollable hilarity which comes over one at times between the absurd scenes of an incoherent dream. The treatise lay open upon the counter, and I bent over it to look at an illustration on one of the pages, a human face distorted by a grotesque and hideous grimace— '*Hemiplegia of the left side of the face.*' And the relentless flies buzzed and buzzed without a pause.

Another thought occurred to me: 'Has the publisher received the manuscript of *Turris eburnea*?' I asked.

'No, sir; it was announced, but nothing exists of it yet but the title.'

'Only the title?'

'Yes; the advertisement has, in fact, been withdrawn.'

'Thanks. Will you send me these books some time to-day, please?'

I gave my address and left.

Once outside I had a peculiar feeling of bewilderment. I seemed to have left behind me there some fragment of a life that was artificial, fictitious, false. All that I had said and done and felt, the figure of the albino, his voice, his gestures,—all appeared to me now unreal, unsubstantial as a dream, like something I had lately read in a book.

I returned home, and the vague sensation was dissipated. I sat down to collect my thoughts, to assure myself that it was all real, indubitable. I easily formed pictures in my mind of the invalid on the lines of my recollection of Spinelli. A fresh curiosity assailed me—What if I went to Naples and saw him? And I imagined the wretched spectacle of this man of intellect degraded by his infirmity, babbling like an idiot. It gave me no sort of satisfaction. The flame of my hatred was spent. Heavy sadness fell upon me.—The ruin of this man's life could not influence my condition, could not repair the ruin of mine. It altered nothing in my present existence nor in my previsions of the future.

I thought of the title of Filippo Arborio's new book—*Turris eburnea*—and all my old doubts came back to madden me. Could it be a mere coincidence that it corresponded with the dedication in the copy of *The Secret*? Or had the writer intended creating a literary personage after the likeness of Giuliana Hermil, and, under the guise of fiction, relating his recent experiences with her? And at that the torturing question presented itself anew — What

course had those experiences taken from beginning to end?

I heard again the words wrung from Giuliana in that never-to-be-forgotten night: 'I love you, have always loved you, have always been yours, and yours alone, except for that one hellish minute of weakness, do you hear?—*One minute of weakness.* And that is the truth. Can you not hear that I am speaking the truth?'

Alas! how often we think to hear truth in a voice that lies! Nothing can save us from being deceived. But if that which I heard in Giuliana's voice was indeed truth, then there was no doubt but that she had been surprised by him in one of those fits of languor, and had suffered the violation in a sort of unconsciousness, awakening out of which, she had realised the irreparable act with horror and loathing, and had driven him away and never seen him again.

All the appearances were in favour of such a supposition, and led me to infer that all connection between Giuliana and him had been broken off long since.

'In my own house!' I thought to myself. And in that house, silent as a tomb, in the deserted, airless rooms, I was pursued by the inevitable torments of my imagination.

CHAPTER XXVI

WHAT should I do? Remain in Rome at the risk of going raving mad in that heat, under that brazen tropical sky? Go to the sea or to the mountains and seek distraction among the elegant visitors of some favourite summer resort? Reawaken the old Adam in me, the voluptuary, and go in search of some new Teresa Raffo or a similar light o' love?

Once or twice I did indulge in reminiscence of that Fair One with Golden Locks who had passed completely from my heart, and even, for a long time now, from my memory. Where was she now? Was Egano still her lover? What should I feel if I saw her again? My curiosity was of the faintest. I knew well that my sole profound and absorbing desire was to return down there—to my house of sorrows, to my torture.

I completed all the necessary arrangements, paid a visit to Dr. Vebesti, telegraphed to La Badiola, and set off on my return journey.

I was devoured by impatience; I could not have been more nervously excited if I had been going towards something new and startling. The journey seemed interminable. Stretched at full length on the stuffy cushions, oppressed by the heat, choked by the dust that poured in through every crevice while the monotonous rumble of the train mingled

with the monotonous chirping of the crickets, I pondered over the approaching events, considered the possibilities of the future, sought to pierce the great shadow of the unknown. The *father* was mortally stricken. What fate awaited the *son*?

CHAPTER XXVII

NOTHING had happened at La Badiola during my very short absence. My return was treated as a high festival. Giuliana's first glance expressed an infinite gratitude.

'You have done well to come back so soon,' my mother said with a smile. 'Giuliana has not had a moment's peace. You will not move again now, it is to be hoped.—By the by, did you remember the lace? No? Oh, what a memory!'

And thus, from the very first moment, the torture began again.

Scarcely were Giuliana and I alone than she said to me, 'I never dared to hope you would come back so soon. I am more than grateful to you!'

In attitude and voice she was timid, humble, touching. To me there was continually visible upon her face a peculiar pained expression which revealed her unceasing disgust at her appearance. This expression never left her; it was visible through all the changing expressions which crossed her face but were never strong enough to obliterate that one; it was inherent and fixed, and it filled me with compassion, wiped away all my rancour, and softened the brutal irony of my moments of perspicacity.

'What have you been doing these days?' I asked her.

'Waiting for you. And you?'

'Nothing. I wanted to come back.'

'To me?' she asked timidly and humbly.

'To you.'

She closed her eyes, and the ghost of a smile trembled on her face. Never, I felt, had I been so beloved as in that hour.

After a little pause, looking at me with wet eyes, she said, 'Thank you, Tullio.'

The tone, the sentiment expressed, brought back another *Thank you* to my mind which she had uttered on that morning of her convalescence long ago, the morning of my first crime.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AND thus I once more resumed the weary burden of my life at La Badiola, which continued without noteworthy episodes, while the hour crept over the sundial and the grasshoppers chirped monotonously under the elms. *Hora est benefaciendi!*

The selfsame turmoil went on in my mind; I was cursed with the same periods of inertia, the same vain aspirations, the contradictory crises — superabundance and aridity. And at times, musing on the grey, neutral, mediocre, and yet omnipotent thing we call life, I thought to myself—'Man is, after all, an accommodating animal. There is no pain or squalor to which he cannot adapt himself. It may be that I shall end by accommodating myself to circumstances. Who knows!'

A frenzy of sarcasm came over me. 'Who knows but what Filippo Arborio's son will be *my very image*, as the saying goes. The process of accommodating myself would then be all the easier.' And I thought of the wretched desire to laugh that had assailed me once when I heard it said of a child (whom I knew for a fact to be illegitimate) in the presence of the lawful parent, 'His father over again!'—And the resemblance was really extraordinary by that mysterious law which physiologists called *hereditary influence*.

It may quite easily happen, therefore, that Raimondo will bear my likeness, and appear as an

authentic Hermil; I may even receive special congratulations on having imprinted the family seal so firmly upon the Heir!

And what if my mother's and brother's expectations were disappointed? What if Giuliana brought a third girl into the world? This possibility relieved me greatly. I felt that I would have far less objection towards a girl; that I might even be able to suffer it. In time she would leave my house, would take another name, would live in the midst of another family.

Meanwhile, the nearer the decisive moment came, the more poignant grew my anxiety and my impatience. I was tired of these fruitless debates with myself, of everlastingly going over the same ground, the same fears, the same perplexities. I would have liked to precipitate events; that something definite, if even a catastrophe, should happen at last. Anything was preferable to this long-drawn agony.

It was September. The summer was dying. The autumn equinox was drawing near, that most delicious season of the year, which seems to bring with it a sort of exquisite intoxication, diffused through the air by the ripe grapes. The charm of it penetrated little by little to my very soul, melting it and filling me at times with a frenzied desire for affection, for fond expansion. Maria and Natalia spent long hours alone with me, either in my apartments, or out in the open country. I had never loved them so deeply, nor found them so engaging. From those eyes in which thought was as yet scarcely awakened, there sometimes fell upon my storm-tossed spirit a ray of peace.

CHAPTER XXIX

ONE day, in the early hours of the afternoon, I went in search of Giuliana. Not finding her in her own rooms, I went to my mother's apartments. The doors were open; I heard neither voices nor any other sound; the light curtains at the windows flapped gently in the breeze; there was a vista of the green elms beyond, a soothing coolness and repose breathed between these walls.

I advanced cautiously into her private sanctum, thinking my mother might be asleep, and walked softly that I might not wake her. I drew aside the portière and lingered for a moment on the threshold. There was a sound of even respiration as of some one asleep. My mother was sleeping in an arm-chair beside the window, and opposite to her in another arm-chair sat Giuliana. I entered the room.

Between them stood a low table, and on it a basket full of tiny caps. My mother had one of these caps in her hand, with the needle still sticking in it. Sleep had overpowered her in the middle of her work. With her chin sunk upon her breast, she slumbered peacefully—perhaps she dreamed. The white thread was half pulling through; but she, doubtless, in her dreams was spinning a more precious one.

Giuliana too was asleep, her head reclining against the back of her chair, her hands lying along its arms. Her features seemed relaxed under the soothing hand of sleep; only her mouth retained its dolorous lines, the shadow of affliction, and between her brows was the little furrow graven deep by her great woe. Her forehead was damp; a drop of moisture trickled slowly down one temple; and her hands, whiter than the muslin from which they emerged, seemed to confess by their attitude alone all the measureless lassitude from which she was suffering.

I looked around—at the little cap in my mother's hands, the basket with its heap of airy lace, and the pink-and-blue ribbons that fluttered in the gentle breeze; and my heart contracted so that I almost feared to swoon. Ah, the tenderness revealed by the dear hands of my mother dreaming there over the dainty white thing which was destined to cover the head of the child that was not mine!

I stayed a moment or two where I was. This was truly the sanctuary of the house, the holy of holies. On one wall hung the portrait of my father, which much resembled Federico; on another that of Costanza, a little like Maria. The two figures, instinct with that supernal vitality with which our constant memory endows the dear ones we have lost, followed me with their magnetic, all-seeing gaze. Other relics of the departed sanctified this spot. In a corner on a pedestal, under glass, and covered with a black veil, lay the death-mask of the man whom my mother had loved with a love that was stronger than death. And yet there was nothing lugubrious about the room. A sovereign peace reigned there, and seemed to diffuse itself through the whole house, as life is diffused harmoniously from a heart.

CHAPTER XXX

I RECOLLECT an excursion to Villalilla with Maria and Natalia and Miss Edith one hazy autumn morning. The recollection itself is hazy, indistinct, confused, like a protracted dream, heartrending, and yet sweet.

The garden no longer showed its myriad sprays of lilac and white, no longer its delicate forest of blossom with its triple perfume harmonious as a chord of music, silent was its joyous vernal laughter, and the continuous clamour of its swallows. The only blithe sounds in it now were the merry voices and the fleet pattering footsteps of the two unconscious children. Many of the swallows had already gone, others were on the point of departing. We had come just in time to give a farewell greeting to the last band.

All the nests were deserted, empty, lifeless. Some of them were in ruins, with here and there a delicate feather hanging fluttering from the tattered clay. The last band had assembled on the roof along the eaves, awaiting some tardy companions to complete the party. There they perched in a long row, some with their backs, some with their beaks turned outwards, so that the little forked tails and little white breasts alternated; and thus waiting, they filled the quiet air with their shrill calls. By twos and threes

the laggards joined their company. The moment of departure drew near. The calls ceased. A blink of languid sunshine descended upon the closed house, the deserted nests. Nothing could exceed the melancholy of those little fragile lifeless feathers, clinging here and there to the tattered clay, and fluttering feebly.

There came a sudden gust of wind, and with a great rustling of wings the whole band rose into the air, hung for an instant suspended over the house, and then, without a waver of uncertainty, as if a road had been traced before them, set forth upon their journey, dwindled into the distance—vanished.

Maria and Natalia, who had mounted upon a seat, the better to follow the flight of the travellers, stretched out their arms and cried—

'Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye, swallows!'

Of the rest I have but a dim recollection, as of a dream.

Maria wished to enter the house, and I opened the door myself. There, up the three steps, Giuliana had followed me furtively, light as a shadow, had encircled me with her arms, and whispered, 'Go in, go in!' The nest still hung from a corner of the ceiling in the hall. Here she had murmured, 'I am yours, yours, yours!' and without loosening her clinging arms from my neck, had slipped round upon my breast to meet my lips. The hall was mute, the staircase was mute, silence brooded over the whole house—silence as of the tomb. Here lay buried all my happiness.

The two little girls kept up an incessant chatter, asked me endless questions, opened every drawer, every cupboard. Miss Edith did her best to keep them within bounds.

'Look, look what I have found!' cried Maria, running to me. At the bottom of a drawer in a heap of lavender she had found a glove. It was one of Giuliana's. The finger-tips were stained black, and in the palm, round the opening, some writing was still visible: '*The mulberries. August 27th*, 188–. *Memento!*' In a flash the episode of the mulberries came back to me distinctly—one of the gayest episodes of our early happiness, a fragment of an idyll.

'Isn't it one of mama's gloves?' asked the child. 'Give it back to me; give it back to me. I want to give it to mama——'

Calisto spoke to me of many things; I hardly took in a word. He repeated several times his happy prognostication—

'A boy, a fine boy—God bless him! A fine boy!'

As we were leaving, and Calisto had locked up the house again—'And these nests?' he asked, shaking his handsome old head.

'Let them be, Calisto.'

The nests were deserted, empty, lifeless. The last of the tenants had flown. A blink of languid sunshine descended upon the silent house and the deserted nests, here and there a little dead feather clung to the tattered clay.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE first half of October had passed, and the final hour was approaching. Dr. Vebesti had been warned; from one day to another Giuliana's trial might set in.

My anxiety increased with every hour, became well-nigh intolerable. At times I would be assailed by some such impulse of madness as had come over me that day on the bank of the river. Then I would flee far from La Badiola, staying for long hours on horseback, forcing Orlando to leap hedges and ditches, spurring him savagely along perilous paths. And we would return, the poor beast and I, bathed in perspiration, exhausted, but unscathed.

The doctor arrived, and every one at La Badiola gave a sigh of relief, plucked up courage again, and hoped for the best. Giuliana alone was not cheered. More than once I surprised the passage of a sinister thought in her eyes, the horror of a dark presentiment.

It was towards evening. My mother, Miss Edith, and the doctor had gone down into the dining-room. Giuliana and I were alone. The lamps had not yet been brought; the violet twilight of October crept into the room; the wind shook the panes from time to time.

'Help me, Tullio! Help me!' she suddenly cried, beside herself with pain, stretching out her arms to me, and gazing at me with dilated eyes, the whites of which gleamed strangely in the half darkness out of her livid face.

'What can I do to help you? Tell me what to do,' I stammered, bewildered, knowing nothing better to do than to stroke her hair with a gesture into which I would have infused some supernatural potency if I could. 'Tell me, tell me!'

She ceased her lamentations; she only looked at me and listened as if forgetful of her pain, struck perhaps by the tone of my voice, by my expression of bewilderment and anguish, by the tremor of my hand upon her hair, and the despairing tenderness of that unavailing gesture.

'You do love me, don't you?' she asked, still keeping her eyes on me as though fearing to lose the smallest sign of my emotion. 'You quite forgive me?'

Then she burst out again, working herself up to renewed excitement. 'You must love me; you must love me all you can now, because by to-morrow I shall not be here; because I shall die to-night, perhaps by this evening I shall be dead; and you would regret not having loved me, not having forgiven me. Oh, I know you would be sorry then——'

She seemed so certain of dying that I was frozen with sudden terror.

'Yes, you must love me. Listen; perhaps you did not believe what I said to you that night; maybe you do not believe me now; but I am certain you will believe as soon as I am gone. Then it will

break in upon you, then you will know the truth, and you will grieve that you did not love me enough, that you did not forgive me——' Tears choked her voice for a moment. 'Do you know why I am sorry to die? Because now you will never know how much I have loved you—how much I have loved you, especially *since*—— Ah, what a punishment! Did I deserve this end?'

She buried her face in her hands; but the next moment she dropped them and fixed her eyes upon me, deathly pale. A still more dreadful idea seemed to have struck her like a thunderbolt.

'And if I die,' she stammered; 'if I die and *leave it alive*——'

'Hush, dear.'

'You understand——'

'Be quiet, Giuliana!'

I was even more unstrung than she. Terror had got dominion over me, and did not leave me the strength to offer her one word of consolation, to set one word of life against her images of death. For I too was persuaded of the dread ending. I could only gaze through the gathering violet gloom at Giuliana, who gazed back at me, and it seemed to me that on that poor wasted face were plainly written the signs of the last agony, the signs of speedy and inarrestable dissolution. She clutched my arm and gave vent to a kind of long-drawn moan that had nothing human in it.

'Help me, Tullio! Help me!'

She gripped me tight, but not tight enough for me, who would have had her bury her nails in my flesh that I might have shared some of her physical pain. She pressed her forehead to my shoulder and

moaned continuously—that sound which in an excess of bodily suffering makes our voices unrecognisable, the sound that reduces the human being who suffers to the level of the suffering beast, the instinctive lamentation of all pain-racked flesh whether human or brute.

From time to time she regained her voice sufficiently to repeat her cry to me for help.

'Oh, Tullio, Tullio, suffocate me, kill me! I cannot, cannot bear it. Do you hear? I will not suffer any more!'

She almost screamed the last words, looking round her with frenzied eyes as if in search of something or somebody who would render her the aid I could not give.

'Calm yourself, calm yourself, Giuliana; perhaps your hour has come. Courage! Sit down here. Courage, dear heart! Bear up a little longer. I am here—here beside you—don't be afraid.'

I flew to the bell and rang it furiously.

'The doctor! Tell the doctor to come at once!'

Giuliana had ceased her moaning. She seemed no longer to be suffering, or at least to have forgotten her pain for the moment, absorbed in a fresh thought. I scarcely had time to notice the sudden change when she said—

'Listen, Tullio. If I become delirious——'

'What are you saying?'

'If afterwards, in my fever, I should become delirious—if I should die in my delirium——'

'Well?'

She had such a tone of terror, her hesitations were so dreadful, that I trembled from head to foot, not understanding what she wished to convey.

'Well?'

'They will all be there—round about me. If in my delirium I were to speak, to *betray*—you know what I mean? A word would be enough—and in delirium one does not know what one says. You must——'

My mother, the doctor, and the nurse entered the room.

'Ah, doctor,' groaned Giuliana; 'I thought I should have died.'

'Courage, courage!' said the doctor in his hearty voice. 'There is nothing to be afraid of. It will all go well.'

He looked at me. 'I think,' he added with a smile, 'that your husband is worse than you are.' He motioned me to the door. 'Go along, go along; we don't want you here.'

I met my mother's anxious, pitiful eyes. 'Yes, Tullio, you had better go,' she said. 'Federico is waiting for you.'

I looked at Giuliâna. Taking no notice of the others, she was gazing intently at me with glistening eyes full of a strange light, and in that gaze was gathered all the intensity of her despairing soul.

'I will not move from the next room,' I declared firmly, returning Giuliana's gaze, as I left the room.

CHAPTER XXXII

It was between four and five in the morning when Cristina came and woke me—I had dropped off to sleep about three o'clock on the sofa, where I sat waiting in the adjoining room—saying that Giuliana wished to see me.

I started to my feet, still dazed and heavy-eyed.

'What is happening? Have I been asleep? Giuliana——'

'Don't be alarmed—nothing has happened. She is quieter now. Come and see her.'

I entered the room, and my eyes fell instantly on Giuliana.

She was lying back upon her pillows, white as the sheets, apparently almost lifeless. I at once encountered her gaze, for her eyes were turned towards the door in expectation of me. Her eyes seemed to me larger, deeper, more hollow, and encircled by a wider ring of shadow.

'You see,' she murmured in an expiring voice, 'I am just as I was.'

She never took her eyes off me, and like those of the Princess Lisa, they said: 'I looked for help from you, but you gave me none—not even you!'

'Where is the doctor?' I asked of my mother, who stood near with a very dejected air.

She pointed to a door. I went to it and entered

another room, where I found the doctor at a table engaged in preparing various medical appliances, and giving instructions to Cristina in a low voice.

'Well?' I exclaimed brusquely, 'what is the matter?'

'Nothing alarming for the moment.'

'Then why all these preparations?'

'Precautions merely.'

'But how long is this agony going to last?'

'We are coming to the end now.'

'Be quite open with me, I beg. Do you expect danger? Tell me frankly.'

'There are as yet no indications of danger. I am merely taking proper precautions in case of hemorrhage. Trust me and keep calm. I have noticed that your presence agitates Giuliana very much. In this brief, final period she has need of all her strength. You really must keep away from her. Promise that you will not disobey me. You can come in when I call you.'

There was a cry from the other room.

'Ah!' he exclaimed, 'the critical moment has arrived. Now, keep calm!'

He went towards the door, and I followed him. We both approached Giuliana. She grasped my arm and held it like a vice. How had she retained so much force?

'Courage! Courage!' I stammered. 'All will go well, will it not, doctor?'

'Yes, of course. Now, there is no time to be lost. Let your husband go away, Giuliana.'

She opened her eyes very wide and gazed at the doctor and at me. Then she loosened her hold on my arm.

'Courage!' I repeated in a choking voice.

I kissed her forehead, wet with the dews of agony, and turned to go.

'Ah, Tullio——!' she screamed after me in a tone that said to me—'I shall never see you again.'

I made as if to return to her.

'Go, go!' commanded the doctor with an imperative gesture.

Some one closed the door behind me. I stood outside for a moment, listening; but my knees were shaking, and the beating of my heart deafened me. I went and threw myself on the sofa, stuffed my handkerchief between my teeth, and buried my face in the cushions. I was suffering some such physical torture as I would have done under a slow and badly-managed amputation. The agonised cries of the poor woman next door reached me through the wall, and at each one I thought—'This is the last.' During the intervals I could hear the low murmur of women's voices: my mother or the nurse trying to comfort her, no doubt. A scream more piercing and inhuman than the others——'That was the last!' I sprang to my feet, sick with terror.

I could not move a step. Some minutes passed; an incalculable time it seemed to me. Every imaginable idea whirled through my mind—'Is it born? What if she is dead—if both are dead—mother and child? No, no; she is dead for certain, and it is alive. But why do I hear no infant's cry?' Then suddenly I had a vision of Giuliana gasping out her last breath—hemorrhage. . . . I flew to the door and entered. Instantly I heard the voice of the doctor exclaiming sharply—'Don't come near her! Don't touch her! Do you want to kill her?'

Giuliana was whiter than her pillows, motionless, apparently dead. My mother was leaning over her arranging a compress. The air reeked with the smell of ammonia.

I looked around me, not hearing the sound I expected. *Some one* was missing here.

'And the child?' I asked tremulously.

'In there—in the next room. Go in and look at it,' answered the doctor, 'and stay there.'

I pointed to Giuliana with a gesture of despair.

'Nothing to be afraid of.—That hot water, Cristina.'

I went to the other room. A feeble, scarcely audible, cry reached my ear. On a thick layer of cotton wool I beheld a tiny red body with patches of violet here and there. The nurse was slapping its back and the soles of its feet.

'Come, sir, come and see what a fine boy it is,' said the nurse, continuing her operations. 'He did not breathe just at first, but all danger is over now. Look what a splendid boy!'

She turned the baby over on its back and showed it to me; then held it up and shook it gently from side to side. The cry became a little louder.

But there was a strange dazzle in my eyes which prevented me from seeing clearly; my whole mind was strangely deadened, so that I failed to gain a distinct impression of the reality of all these terrible things.

'Look!' repeated the nurse, laying the wailing infant once more upon the cotton wool in her lap.

It was crying lustily now—it breathed—it lived! I bent over the gasping little form and examined it, endeavouring to discover the abhorrent likeness.

But the tiny face was swollen still and somewhat livid, with protruding eyeballs and tumid lips and sloping chin—vague, monstrous, scarcely human, it inspired me with nothing but disgust.

'At first,' I stammered, 'when it was first born, it did not breathe?'

'No, sir. A little touch of apoplexy——'

She continued her attentions to the baby while she spoke, and I looked at those bony hands which had given the child its life.

'Now he is all right and comfortable. God bless him!'

The wail grew louder; the baby cried in a kind of rage, jerking its limbs, still preserving its look of apoplexy, its blue-red colour, its repulsive aspect. It cried louder and louder, as if to give me an incontestable proof of its vitality, as if to provoke, to exasperate me.

It lived, it lived—but the mother?

I rushed into the other room like a madman.

'Tullio!'

It was Giuliana's voice, weak as that of the dying.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE constant current of water at a high temperature arrested the hemorrhage in about ten minutes, and now the patient was lying quietly in bed. It was broad daylight.

I sat at her bedside and watched her silently, sadly. She may not have been asleep, but her excessive weakness deprived her of all motion, all sign of life. I made an instinctive movement as if to touch her, for it seemed to me she must be icy cold, but I restrained myself for fear of disturbing her. More than once, during my long watch, I started up to call the doctor, overcome by sudden alarm. Absently drawing a piece of bandage through my fingers as I sat, I had unravelled it completely, and now in my invincible anxiety I held it from time to time before Giuliana's lips with infinite caution, judging of the strength of her respiration by the fluttering of the slender threads.

She lay on her back with her head low on the pillows. Her loosened chestnut brown hair framed her face, rendering her features more attenuated and more waxen than ever. Her night-dress was gathered close at the throat and the wrists, and her hands lying prone outside the bed were so white that only the blue veins distinguished them from the sheet. A superhuman benignity seemed to emanate from

that poor bloodless, motionless form, penetrating my whole being, and cutting me to the heart. That faded drooping mouth, revealing her mortal exhaustion, distorted by the pain that had wrung such cries from her, seemed ever to reiterate, 'What have you brought me to?'

Her slender form scarcely raised the clothes from the level of the bed. Now that the event was consummated; that she was freed at last of her horrible burden; that at last that *other life* was separated from her life for ever, those instinctive impulses of disgust, those sudden clouds of rancour no longer rose up to dim my fondness and my pity. Now I was conscious of nothing but tenderest love and tenderest compassion for her as for the sweetest and most unfortunate creature that ever lived. Now my whole soul hung upon those poor lips which from one moment to another might render up their last sigh. With deepest sincerity I thought as I considered her deathlike pallor, 'How cheerfully would I transfer the half of my blood to her veins!'

Musing thus, I heard the faint ticking of a clock on the table beside the bed, and realised that time was flying measured by that even beat.

'*He* is alive,' I thought to myself, 'and his life is tenacious. When he was born, he did not breathe; he had still all the signs of asphyxia upon him when I saw him; and if the nurse had not saved him, he would now be only a tiny livid corpse, a thing innocuous, to be put out of sight, perhaps forgotten. I should have nothing to think about but Giuliana's recovery. I would not move from her bedside, would be the gentlest and most assiduous of nurses, would accomplish the miracle, would bring her back

to life by sheer force of love. It would be impossible for her not to get well; she would emerge out of the depths little by little, regenerated, with blood renewed. She would seem to be a new creature, cleansed of all impurity. Both would feel ourselves purified, worthy one of the other, after so long and so dolorous an expiation. Her illness, her convalescence, would lend an indefinite remoteness to the dreadful past, and I would wipe out all recollection of it from her mind, would give her perfect oblivion in my love. Every other human love would seem utterly futile when compared with ours after so great a trial.' My spirit was exalted in the light of this mystic imaginary future, while under my ardent gaze Giuliana's face assumed a certain insubstantiality, almost as if she already belonged to another world. The mute question no longer pierced me with remorse, no longer seemed terrible to me, and I answered: 'Have you not become, by my doing, *the Sister of Sorrows*? Has your soul not risen through suffering to giddy heights from which you can look down upon the world and view it in a new light? Have you not received through me the revelation of truth supreme? What matter that we have sinned, have fallen, if we have succeeded in tearing some veil of darkness from before our eyes, if we have been able to break the fetters off what is least base in our miserable humanity? To us will be given the sublimest joy after which the elect on earth can strive—to be consciously born again.'

Thus I exalted myself. There was silence in the alcove, the shadow was mysterious, Giuliana's face ghostly; and my contemplation of her seemed to me most solemn because I felt the presence of death

invisible. My whole soul hung upon those pallid lips which, from one moment to another, might render up their last sigh.

And now the lips contracted, a moan broke from them. The furrow in the brow grew deeper, the eyelids quivered slightly, and a line of white appeared between the lashes.

I leaned over the sufferer. She opened her eyes and shut them again instantly; she did not seem to have seen me. Her eyes had a sightless look as if she had suddenly been struck blind. Could that be so?

I heard footsteps in the room, and, issuing from the alcove, I saw the doctor, my mother, and the nurse coming in softly.

'Is she asleep?' whispered the doctor.

'She moaned just now. Who knows what she may not be suffering!'

'Has she spoken yet?'

'No.'

'She must not be excited in any way—remember that.'

'She opened her eyes for a moment, but she did not seem to see anything.'

The doctor went into the alcove, motioning me to stay outside.

'Come away,' said my mother; 'the applications must be renewed now. Come, we will go and look at Mondino. Federico is there.'

She took me by the hand, and I let her lead me away.

'He has gone to sleep,' she went on, 'and is sleeping most placidly. The nurse will be here by the afternoon.'

Although she was so anxious and depressed about Giuliana, her eyes beamed when she spoke of the child; her whole face lit up with fondness.

By the doctor's orders, a distant room had been chosen for the nursery, a large and airy apartment which held many memories of our childhood. Round the cradle were grouped Federico, Maria, and Natalia, all intent upon the sleeping baby. The moment I entered Federico hastened to ask how Giuliana was.

'Very bad.'

'Not resting?'

'She is in great pain.'

I answered roughly, almost in spite of myself. I could feel nothing but my indomitable and undisguisable aversion for the intruder and my annoyance and impatience at the torture these people were unconsciously inflicting upon me. Do what I would, I could not conceal it. My mother and I joined the group round the cradle watching the sleeping Raimondo.

He was now firmly wrapped up and his head covered by one of the little caps trimmed with lace and ribbon. His face was less swollen and puffy, but still congested, the cheek shiny like the skin over a recently healed scar. A little water trickled from the corners of his mouth; the eyelids, without lashes, and inflamed at the edges, covered the prominent eyeballs; a livid patch indicated the root of the as yet shapeless little nose.

'Now whom is he like?' said my mother. 'I have not been able to find the resemblance yet——'

'He is too young,' said Federico. 'We must wait a day or two.'

My mother kept looking from me to the child, comparing the features.

'No,' she said, 'on the whole, he is more like Giuliana.'

'At present he is not like anybody,' I broke in. 'He is hideous.'

'Hideous? Why, he is quite beautiful! Look, what a quantity of hair!' and she very gently pushed the cap back with her finger, disclosing the little soft palpitating head with its few scanty brown hairs. It looked exactly as if it were of wax slightly melted by the heat, dark-coloured and unctuous, and as if the lightest touch must leave a mark.

'Let me touch it, grandmama,' entreated Maria, stretching out her hand towards the baby's head.

'No, no. Do you want to wake him?' and she readjusted the cap, and bending over him, kissed his forehead with infinite precaution.

'Me too, grandmama,' begged Maria.

'But softly, for pity's sake!'

The cradle was too high. 'Lift me up!' she said to Federico, who did as he was asked, and I saw the sweet rose-leaf mouth of my little daughter shape itself for the kiss before it brushed the baby's forehead and her long curls rained down over the white bundle.

Federico kissed it in his turn. Then he looked at me. I did not smile.

'Me too, me too!' clamoured Natalia, holding on to the edge of the cradle.

'Gently, gently!'

Federico lifted her up, and again I saw a shower of curls falling round the white bundle as the sweet little figure bent over. I stood as if turned to stone,

and my face must assuredly have expressed something of the baleful sentiment which possessed me. Those kisses from the lips that were so dear to me had in no way lessened the repulsiveness of the intruder's aspect; on the contrary, he seemed to me more odious than before. I felt that it would be impossible to me to touch that alien flesh, to descend to any show of paternal affection. My mother looked at me anxiously, surprised.

'Are you not going to kiss him?' she asked.

'No, mama, I can't—he has done too much harm to Giuliana. I cannot forgive him——' And I drew back with an instinctive and manifest shudder of disgust. My mother stood for a moment dumbfounded.

'But what are you saying, Tullio? What fault is it of the poor baby's? Be just!'

My mother had certainly no doubt as to the sincerity of my aversion. I could not control myself; my every nerve rose in revolt.

'I cannot yet—I cannot—— Leave me alone just now, mama—it will pass.'

My voice was harsh and resolute. There was a lump in my throat, and the muscles of my face contracted painfully. After so many hours of violent agitation, my whole being cried out for some relaxation. I believe that a burst of tears would have relieved me; but the lump in my throat would not give way.

'You pain me very much, Tullio,' said my mother.

'Will you force me to kiss it?' I exclaimed savagely; and going up to the cradle, I leaned over the infant and kissed it.

It woke on the instant and began to cry, feebly at first, and then with a sort of growing fury. Its face

grew purple and all puckered with the effort, while the little white tongue quivered in the gaping mouth. Although I was half crazed with desperation, I could not but acknowledge the error I had committed. I felt the eyes of my family fixed upon me in stupefied, intolerable alarm.

'Forgive me, mama,' I faltered. 'I hardly know what I am doing—I am half out of my mind—forgive me.'

She had taken the baby out of the cradle, and was hushing it in her arms, but it refused to be comforted. Its cry seemed to pierce my nerves and lacerate them.

'Let us go, Federico.'

I hurried from the room, followed by Federico. 'Giuliana is very ill. I cannot understand how any one can think of anything but her at such a moment,' I said, to justify my behaviour. 'You have not seen her. She looks like death.'

CHAPTER XXXIV

FOR some days Giuliana hovered between life and death, her weakness so extreme that the very slightest effort was followed by a fainting fit. She had to lie perfectly still and flat upon her back, any attempt to raise her bringing on signs of cerebral anæmia.

Day and night I never left her bedside, was ever on the watch, displayed an unwearying energy at which I was myself surprised. With all the strength of my life, I sought to keep alive the flame that threatened every moment to expire. It seemed as if at the other side of the bed Death lay in wait ready to seize the first opportunity for pouncing on his prey. Then indeed I felt as if I were transfusing my blood into that frail body, were communicating to her some of my strength, giving a fresh impulse to her feebly-beating heart. No sad detail of the sickroom inspired me with the slightest repugnance or disgust. All my senses were keenly on the alert to notice the faintest change in the patient's condition. Before she uttered a word, before she made a sign, I had divined her wish, the degree of her suffering. By sheer divination, independently of any suggestion from the doctor, I succeeded in finding new and ingenious methods of alleviatimg her pain, of soothing her restlessness. I alone could persuade

her to take nourishment, or get a little sleep. I had recourse to every device of entreaty and coaxing to make her swallow her medicine; and worked upon her so persistently, that finally, unable to resist me, she gathered up sufficient strength to overcome her nausea. Her smallest act of obedience touched my heart to the depths. When she said in her weak voice and with her faint sweet smile, 'Is that right? Am I good now?' a lump rose in my throat, and my eyes grew dim.

Often she would complain of a painful throbbing in her temples that gave her no rest, and I would pass my fingers along her brow to magnetise the pain. I softly stroked her hair to put her to sleep. When I was sure, by her breathing, that she slept, I had an illusory sensation as if this beneficent slumber extended its restorative qualities to me. Before those slumbers I became religious, was filled with undefined fervours, felt the necessity of belief in some superior, all-seeing, all-powerful Being to whom to offer up my vows. Forms of Christian prayer rose from the bottom of my heart; that inward eloquence exalting me sometimes to the heights of real Faith. Mystic tendencies awoke in me transmitted by a long line of Catholic forefathers.

And while engaged upon these silent orisons, I watched the sleeper. She was still as white as her linen; I could have counted the veins on her cheek, her chin, her throat, through the transparent skin. I wished that by some supernatural faculty I might have witnessed the mysterious work of recuperation going on in that exhausted form, and I always hoped that when she woke she would feel stronger.

She seemed to find much solace in holding one of my hands in her cold ones. Sometimes she would take it and put it on the pillow, and then lay her cheek upon it like a tired child, and so fall presently asleep. I would keep my arm motionless and cramped for a long long time rather than wake her.

Now and then she would say, 'Why do you not go to sleep too, here beside me—you never sleep?'

And she would make me lay my head down on the pillow.

'Very well, then we will both sleep,' and I would close my eyes to give her a good example. But when I opened them again, I always found hers wide open and gazing at me.

'Well!' I exclaimed, 'what are you doing?'

'And you?' she retorted.

There was an expression of such boundless kindness in her eyes that I felt my heart leap within me. I advanced my lips and kissed her on the eyelids. She insisted on doing the same to me, and then repeated—

'Now we will go to sleep.'

And sometimes a veil of oblivion descended upon our unhappiness.

Her poor little feet were generally cold as ice; when I felt them under the coverlet they might have been marble.

'I think they are dead,' she said.

They were so slender and tiny that they almost went into my hand. They filled me with pity, and I was never tired of trying to warm them. I would have warmed them with my breath, would have covered them with kisses.

One day, I was so tired after long watching, that sleep overtook me irresistibly while I was kneeling by the bedside in the act of wrapping those little lifeless feet in hot flannel. My head dropped forward, and I was fast asleep.

When I awoke, I found my mother, the doctor, and Federico standing looking at me, and smiling. I was covered with confusion.

'Poor boy, he is quite worn out!' exclaimed my mother, smoothing my tumbled hair with a fond hand.

'Take him away, mama,' begged Giuliana. 'You, Federico, take him away.'

'No, no, I am not tired,' I declared. 'I am not tired.'

The doctor had come to announce his impending departure. The patient, he asserted, was out of danger, and on the best road to recovery. We must follow out every means of building up her strength now. A colleague of his with whom he had conferred would continue the charge of the case, which was now of the simplest. He trusted more to a strict observance of the various hygienic and dietary rules he had laid down than to medicines.

'And I am sure,' he concluded, turning to me, 'that I could not wish for a more intelligent, careful, or devoted nurse than you have been. You have done wonders, and will do more. I can depart in peace.'

I felt as if my heart rose into my throat and suffocated me. This unexpected praise from our severe old friend touched me deeply, was an immense reward. I looked at Giuliana, and saw that her eyes were swimming, and under my gaze she suddenly

burst into tears. I made a strenuous effort to control myself, but did not succeed. I felt my whole soul melt within me. A world of fond and tender emotions swelled my breast in that never-to-be-forgotten hour.

CHAPTER XXXV

THOUGH Giuliana's strength improved slowly day by day, I relaxed none of my attentions. Dr. Vebesti's encouraging assurances only served to make me redouble my assiduity; I would let no one take my place, and resisted all my mother's and brother's entreaties that I should rest. I had grown quite accustomed to the arduous work, and nothing tired me. For me, life did not extend beyond these four walls, beyond the space in which my beloved invalid breathed.

Had she need of absolute quiet, must she talk but very little lest she should tire herself, I managed to keep even the members of the family away from her bedside. That alcove was a place set apart from the rest of the house. For hours and hours, Giuliana and I would remain alone. And she being constrained by her illness, and I intent upon my offices as sick-nurse, it would happen occasionally to us to forget our trouble, for our ideas of the reality of things to be blurred, for us to be conscious of nothing but our measureless love. Nothing came to remind us of our horror. I only saw before me a suffering sister, and had no other solicitude than to ease her pain. At times, I felt as if nothing existed outside the curtains of the alcove, so intensely did my whole being go out towards the sufferer.

But, not infrequently, this veil of oblivion would be ruthlessly torn asunder. My mother would mention Raimondo. The curtains would part to let the intruder enter, borne in my mother's arms. And I was there, and felt myself turn pale as all the blood retreated to my heart. What were Giuliana's feelings?

I looked at the pink face, no bigger than my fist, half hidden by the lace-trimmed cap; and with a fierce aversion which wiped out every other sentiment from my soul, I thought to myself, 'How shall I free myself of you? Why—oh, why did you not die without ever drawing breath!' My hatred knew no bounds, was instinctive, indomitable, bloodthirsty; nothing could repress it, nothing destroy it. The presence of the intruder was sufficient, at any hour, at any juncture, to bring about an instantaneous and general cataclysm in me, and I was possessed by one sole sentiment—hatred against him.

'Look how he has changed in these few days,' my mother said to Giuliana. 'He is more like you than Tullio, but not very much like either of you. He is too young yet—we shall see presently.—Do you want to kiss him?' And she held the baby's forehead to the sick mother's lips.

What were Giuliana's feelings?

The child began to cry. I had the strength of mind to conceal my irritation and say quietly to my mother, 'You had better take him away. Giuliana must be kept very quiet just now. Any noise is very bad for her.'

My mother left the alcove. The baby's wails grew louder, and filled me with but one desire—to go

and suffocate it that I might hear that sound no more. We heard it for some minutes before it died away in the distance. When the sound finally ceased, the silence seemed to fall upon me in a block —massive, horrible. But I did not linger over my own sensations; I remembered instantly that Giuliana was in need of succour.

'Ah, Tullio, Tullio—this cannot go on——'

'Hush, hush, if you love me, Giuliana! Don't speak of it, I implore you!'

All my hostility had fallen from me, I grieved only for her pain, feared only for the harm she might have received, the shock to her frail thread of life.

'If you love me, you must think of nothing but getting well. I think of nothing but you; all my grief and suffering is only for you. You must not let yourself be worried; you must give yourself up wholly to my affection and try to get well——'

'But who knows what you have to go through, my poor darling!' she murmured in her weak and tremulous voice.

'No, no, Giuliana, you must not trouble about that! I only suffer when I see you suffering. I forget everything when I see you smile. When you feel easy, I am perfectly happy. So, if you love me, you must get well, you must be calm and obedient and patient. When you have quite recovered, are quite strong again—*who knows!*—God is good!'

'Lord, have mercy upon us,' she whispered.

'In what manner?' I thought to myself. 'By letting the intruder die?'

We were therefore both offering up a prayer for death, seeing that she too knew of no other way of

escape but by the destruction of the child. I thought of our brief dialogue under the elms in the sunset long ago and her pitiful confession then. 'But now that it is born, does she still loathe it? Can she have a sincere aversion against the flesh of her flesh? Can she really mean to pray to God to take back this little soul into His keeping?'—I remembered the wild hope that had flashed across me on that tragic evening: 'What if the suggestion of a crime sank into her mind and became by degrees so strong as to carry her away——?' Had I not had a momentary vision of some such unsuccessful attempt on her part, when I saw the nurse vigorously rubbing the back and soles of the feet of that tiny, congested form, that infant who was scarcely alive? No—Giuliana would never have had the courage—that had been another of my mad ideas!

And I gazed at her hands lying prone upon the bed, and so white that only the blue veins distinguished them from the sheet.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A STRANGE sense of annoyance stirred in my heart now that my patient was getting stronger every day; a vague regret for the melancholy dark days passed in the alcove, while from the autumnal country outside came the dull, monotonous sound of the rain. Those mornings, those evenings, those nights, though full of weariness and pain, had not been without their grave sweetness. My labours in the sickroom grew daily more beautiful in my eyes. An ocean of love flowed in upon my soul and drowned, for a while, my gloomy thoughts, letting me forget my horrid fate, raising up in me some consoling illusion, some undefined dream. I felt at times as if I were in some shadowy, secret chapel; as if I were in sanctuary against the violence of life, against temptation and sin. Those curtains seemed to separate me from a yawning abyss; sudden fears assailed me as to the unknown beyond them. In the night watches, I listened to the silence of the house around me, and with the eyes of my soul I beheld in that distant room, under the soft rays of the lamp, the cradle in which slept the intruder, the joy and delight of my mother, my heir. And a shuddering horror ran through me, and I remained for a long time dazed by the sinister flash of one thought. Those curtains separated me from a yawning abyss.

But now that Giuliana was daily growing stronger, we had no excuse for our isolation, and little by little the ordinary domestic life of the house invaded the quiet room. My mother, my brother, the little girls, Miss Edith, came in much oftener than at first, and stayed much longer. Raimondo forced himself upon his mother's notice. It was no longer possible for me or Giuliana to avoid him. We were obliged to kiss him, to smile at him; were obliged to simulate and dissemble carefully, to bear all the refinement of cruelty which the circumstances brought in their train, to die by inches.

Nourished by a healthy, buxom nurse, surrounded by every doating care, Raimondo gradually lost his unpleasing aspect, began to grow round and fair, to assume more definite outlines, and to open his grey eyes wide. But his every movement was odious to me, from the motion of his lips while sucking to the aimless jerkings of his little hands. I never could see one trace of beauty, one engaging charm in him; never had I one thought for him that was not hostile. When I was forced to touch him, when my mother held him up for me to kiss, my skin went cold, as it would have done at the contact with some loathsome animal. My every fibre revolted against it, all my nerves were up in arms.

Each day brought me a fresh torture, and my mother it was who thus put me on the rack. One day, coming unexpectedly into the room and parting the curtains of the alcove, I perceived the baby lying on the bed at Giuliana's side. No one else was there —we three were alone. The baby slept peacefully.

'Mama left it here,' stammered Giuliana.

I fled like a maniac.

Another time Cristina came to call me to the nursery, where I found my mother seated on a low chair with the baby on her lap divested of all its wrappings.

'I wanted to show him to you before I wrapped him up again,' she said. 'Look!'

The baby, feeling himself free, was stretching his arms and legs, turning his eyes from side to side, stuffing his fists into his mouth. Round his wrists, his ankles, and behind his knees the flesh was moulded into rings dusted over with powder. My mother's hands touched the tiny limbs with delight, pointed out each detail, lingered fondly on the skin all moist and smooth from the recent bath. And the baby seemed to enjoy it thoroughly.

'Just feel how firm he is,' she said, inviting me to feel the soft flesh; and I was obliged to touch it.

'And what a weight!'

I was obliged to lift him, to feel that tiny warm body palpitating in my hands, which were overcome with a tremor—but not of affection.

'Look!' and mother took between finger and thumb a little piece of the flesh on the delicate chest which held within it the tenacious life of the malefic little being.

'Darling, darling, granny's darling!' she cried, tickling the baby's chin with her finger.

The dear grey head which had leaned thus over the cradle of my little girls now leaned, all unconscious, over the son of another man, an intruder. It seemed to me that she had not been as tender towards Maria or Natalia, who were true flesh of my flesh.

She was going to dress him herself. Over the

little naked body she first made the sign of the cross.

'You are not a Christian yet, you know.'

Then, turning to me—'We must fix the day for his christening.'

CHAPTER XXXVII

DR. VEBESTI'S substitute, Dr. Jemma, Knight of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, a handsome, jovial old man, brought Giuliana a morning gift of a great bunch of white chrysanthemums.

'Oh, my favourite flowers!' exclaimed Giuliana. 'Thank you so much.'

She took the bouquet and gazed at it long, touching the flowers with her slender fingers; and there was a sad likeness between her pallor and that of the autumnal flowers. They were like full-blown roses, thick-petalled and heavy, with maladive flesh tints, bloodless, swooning; the livid whiteness that covers the cheeks of little beggar children shivering in the cold. Some of them showed a delicate violet veining, others inclined to faintest yellow.

'There,' she said to me, 'please put them in water.'

It was in the morning, and it was November—only a few days since the anniversary of a day of sinister memory which these flowers recalled to me.

Che farò senza Euridice?

The air from Orfeo rang in my ears while I put the white chrysanthemums in a vase. Fragments of the singular scene which had occurred a year ago rose up before my spirit:—Giuliana in a flood of mild and golden light, the faint delicious perfume,

the many objects surrounding her all instinct with feminine grace, and the antique melody that seemed to set some secret life throbbing there, to diffuse some shadow of I know not what mystery. Did these flowers bring back a memory to her too?

A mortal sadness weighed upon my soul, the sadness of an inconsolable lover. The Other reappeared before me; his eyes were grey like those of the intruder.

'You may open the windows,' the doctor called to me from the alcove, 'so that as much air and sunshine as possible should come into the room.'

'Oh yes, yes—open it!' exclaimed the patient.

I did as I was bid. At the same moment, my mother came in, followed by the nurse carrying Raimondo in her arms. I stayed behind the curtains and leaned out of the window gazing into the distance. I heard the familiar voices behind me.

It was towards the end of November, and the *summer of the dead* was already over. A great white light spread out over the wet country and over the noble and placid outline of the hills. The olives loomed indistinctly out of a silvery mist. A pale thread of smoke rose up here and there into the still sky. A faint rustle of leaves was borne on the fitful little gusts of wind. All the rest was silence and peace.

'Why did she sing that morning?' I thought to myself. 'Why was I so perturbed on hearing her? She seemed to me to have become *another woman.* Did she love him then? To what state of her soul did that unwonted effusion give expression?—She sang because she was in love. And yet perhaps I am altogether mistaken. I shall never know the

truth!' I no longer felt the turbid jealousy of the senses; a more spiritual regret rose out of the depths of my soul. 'Of what nature is her remembrance of him?' my thoughts went on. 'How often has the lash of memory stung her?—The child is a living bond between them. In Raimondo she must find something of the man to whom she gave herself; she must see more distinct resemblances. It is not possible that she should forget the father of Raimondo. Maybe she has him always before her eyes. What would her feelings be if she knew that he was mortally stricken?' And I lingered in imagination over the progressive stages of the paralysis, forming pictures of the man after my recollections of poor Spinelli.

'Tullio!'

It was my mother's voice. I left the window and entered the alcove.

Giuliana was lying very silent and low-spirited; the doctor was examining the baby's head.

'We are going to have the christening the day after to-morrow,' announced my mother. 'The doctor says that Giuliana had better stay in bed a little while longer.'

'How do you find her, doctor?' I asked, pointing to the patient.

'It seems to me that there is a slight standstill in her progress,' he replied, shaking his fine old head. 'I find her very weak, very weak indeed. We must increase the amount of nourishment, get up her strength again——'

Giuliana looked at me with a smile of utter weariness. 'He has examined my heart,' she interrupted.

'Well?' I asked, turning rapidly to the doctor.

'Could not be healthier,' he answered at once. 'She needs nothing but plenty of good blood—and quiet. We must cheer up! cheer up! How is the appetite to-day?'

She moved her blanched lips with a motion of disgust, then gazed out of the open window at the little piece of delicate sky.

'Is it cold out to-day?' she asked, half timidly withdrawing her hands under the bedclothes.

And she shivered visibly.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE next day Federico and I went in search of Giovanni di Scordio. It was the last afternoon of November. We went on foot across the ploughed fields.

We walked along in silence, each occupied with his own thoughts. The sun sank slowly towards the horizon; a cloud of dust—golden, impalpable—floated in the tranquil air above our heads. The damp earth showed a vivid brown, gave an impression of quiet strength, almost, one would have said, a placid consciousness of its potency. A visible breath rose from the soil like that which streams from the nostrils of the cattle. All white objects assumed under the strange mild radiance an extraordinary whiteness as of the driven snow. A distant cow, the shirt of a field labourer, a sheet spread out to bleach, the wall of a dairy,—all shone resplendent as under the rays of the full moon.

'You are out of spirits,' said Federico to me gently.

'Yes, *amico mio*, I am—desperately.'

There followed a long silence. Clouds of birds rose out of the hedges with a great flurry of wings as we passed. A faint sound of cow-bells reached us out of the distance.

'But what are you in such despair about?' my brother continued in the same kind tone.

'About Giuliana's safety.'

He was silent; he had no word of consolation to offer. Perhaps his heart too was aching.

'I have a presentiment,' I added, 'that Giuliana will never rise from her bed.'

He made no response. We were passing through a woodland path, and the fallen leaves crackled under our footsteps; where there were no leaves the ground echoed dully as over a subterranean cavity.

'And when she dies,' I went on, 'what is to become of me?'

Sudden fear came upon me, a sort of blind panic; I looked at my brother silent and frowning; I looked around me at the mute desolation of the dying day; never had I felt the appalling void of life as I did at that hour.

'No, no, Tullio,' said my brother, 'Giuliana *cannot die.*'

His affirmation was vain, was utterly valueless in face of the decree of Fate; and yet he pronounced the words with such simplicity and faith that it startled me. Thus will children sometimes give utterance to unexpected and weighty words which pierce suddenly to the heart's core, and the voice of fate seems to speak through their unconscious lips.

'Are you reading in the future?' I asked him, without a shadow of irony.

'No. But that is *my* presentiment, and I believe in it firmly.'

Once again I received a flash of confidence from my good brother; once again he widened for me the iron ring that bound my heart. The respite was brief. During the rest of the walk he talked to me of Raimondo.

As we neared Giovanni's cottage, Federico caught sight of the tall figure of the old man in one of the fields.

'Look, there he is! He is sowing. We are bringing the invitation in a solemn hour.'

We directed our steps towards him. I was shaken with an inward tremor, as if I were preparing to commit some act of profanation. And so indeed I was about to profane a beautiful and holy thing: I was going to ask for the spiritual paternity of this most venerable of men for a child of adultery.

'What a grand figure!' exclaimed Federico, pointing to the sower. 'He is the height of an ordinary man, and yet he seems a giant.'

We stopped beside a tree at the other end of the field and watched him. Giovanni had not yet caught sight of us.

He advanced in a straight line across the field with slow and measured step. His head was covered by a green-and-black woollen *beret* with two flaps coming down over the ears like an ancient Phrygian cap. A white bag full of grain hung round his neck by a leather strap and reached to his waist. With his left hand he held the mouth of the bag open, while with his right he took out the grain and scattered it. His gesture was broad, free, and experienced and rhythmically even. The grain flew from his hand and glittered in the air like specks of gold, to fall then into the rich damp furrows. The sower advanced slowly, his bare feet sinking into the yielding soil, his head raised to the sanctity of the light; his whole person breathed a grand and dignified simplicity.

We went across the field towards him.

'God be with you, Giovanni!' exclaimed Federico. 'May your sowing be blessed to you. May your future bread be blessed to you.'

'God be with you!' I repeated.

The old man broke off his occupation and uncovered his head.

'Put on your cap, Giovanni, unless you want us to take off ours,' said Federico.

The old man put on his cap again confused, smiling, a little embarrassed.

'To what do I owe this honour?' he asked diffidently.

And I answered in a voice that I had the utmost difficulty in keeping firm, 'I have come to beg you to stand godfather to my son.'

The old man looked at me dumbfounded, then he turned to my brother. His confusion waxed great.

'Too much honour for me!' he murmured.

'Well, what do you say?'

'I am your servant. God reward you for the honour you have done me this day, and praised be His holy name for such joy sent to me in my old age. May all the blessings of Heaven be poured out upon your son!'

'Thank you, Giovanni.'

I held out my hand to him, and I saw the deepset, mournful eyes grow wet with emotion. My heart was breaking under its weight of measureless distress.

'How will you name him?' asked the old man.

'Raimondo.'

'After your father of blessed memory. He was a man in a thousand! You are like him.'

'Are you alone at the sowing?' said my brother.

'Yes, I sow and cover up the grain again myself.' He pointed to a harrow and a rake lying on the brown earth. All round about us lay the good seed, as yet uncovered, from which the corn would spring hereafter.

'Well,' said my brother, 'we will leave you to your work. Come to-morrow morning to La Badiola. Good-bye, Giovanni. May your sowing be blessed to you.'

We both pressed that indefatigable right hand, sanctified by labour and the good it had sown around it. The old man prepared to accompany us to the gate of the field, but he stopped first and said hesitatingly, 'May I ask a favour?'

'What is it, Giovanni?'

He opened the bag that hung round his neck. 'Will you take a handful of grain and throw it on my field?'

I put my hand in, and gathering as much seed as I could, scattered it over the ground. My brother did the same.

'And God give,' went on Giovanni di Scordio in a tone of deep emotion, 'that my godson may grow up as good as the bread that shall be born of this seed. So be it!'

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE next morning the ceremony of baptism took place, but without the usual festivities on account of Giuliana's health. The child was taken to the chapel by the covered way which connected it with the house. My mother, my brother, Maria, Natalia, Miss Edith, the two nurses, and Dr. Jemma attended. I stayed beside Giuliana's pillow.

She lay in a heavy stupor; a scarcely perceptible breath issued from the half-open lips, pale as the most pallid rose that blossoms in the shade.

The alcove was full of shadows, and I thought as I looked at her: 'So I am not going to save her after all? I had driven death away, and here it is back again. If some sudden change does not occur, she will certainly die. As long as I was able to keep Raimondo away from her, as long as I was able, by my devoted care and love, to create some illusion, to let her forget, she seemed on the way to recovery. But since she has been forced to see the child, her tortures have begun again, and she grows worse every day, fades more rapidly than if the hemorrhage had continued. I must be a witness of her agony. She will not listen to me, will not obey me as she did at first. And who is dealing out death to her? Who but *he!* He will kill her, most assuredly——' A wave of hatred mounted up out of the roots of my

being, and seemed to rush into my very finger tips with a murderous impulse. I saw the malefic little creature rosy and fat with wholesome milk, flourishing in peace and safety, surrounded by every doating care. 'My mother loves it better than Giuliana! She is more concerned about it than about this poor dying creature! Ah, I must put it out of the way, at any price!' And a vision of the already consummated crime flashed across me—a vision of a tiny shrouded form, a little innocuous corpse upon a bier. 'Its baptism will serve for its viaticum.'

Sudden curiosity assailed me. Giuliana lay in the same comatose sleep. I rose and softly left the room; called to Cristina to take my place at the bedside, and then directed my steps quickly towards the chapel, panting and breathless with agitation.

The door was open, and I saw that kneeling in front of the grating was a man whom I recognised as Pietro, the faithful old servant who had been in the family when I was born and had assisted at my baptism. He began to rise stiffly.

'Stay where you are, Pietro,' I whispered to him, laying my hand on his shoulder, and constraining him to remain on his knees.

I knelt at his side, and leaning my forehead against the grating, I looked into the chapel below. I could see everything that went on quite distinctly, and heard the formulas of the ritual.

The ceremony had commenced. I learned from Pietro that the child had already received the salt. Don Gregorio Artese, the parish priest of Tussi, was officiating. He and the godfather was reciting the Creed: the one aloud, the other following him in a low voice. Giovanni held the baby on his right arm,

with the hand that yesterday had sown the good seed. His left hand lay among the white laces and ribbons of the baby's robe. And those hands—bony, sinewy, brown, looking as if they might have been cast in living bronze; those hands grown horny in the service of agriculture, sanctified by the good they had wrought, by the vast labours in which they had taken part, now held the infant with a delicacy, with so touching and so anxious a care, that I could not take my eyes off them. Raimondo did not cry; he kept up a continual movement of the lips, and water trickled over his chin on to the embroidered bib beneath it.

The exorcism finished, the priest wet his finger with saliva and touched the little pink ears, accompanying the gesture with the miraculous word—

'*Ephphetæ.*'

He touched the little nostrils, saying—

'*In odorem suavitatis.*'

He then dipped his thumb in the chrism and anointed the child's breast with the sign of the cross; Giovanni then turned it over, and the priest anointed it in the same manner between the shoulders, saying—

'*Ego te linio oleo salutis in Christo Jesu Domino nostro.*'

He proceeded to wipe the places he had anointed with a piece of cotton.

After this he took off the violet stole, the colour of penitence and sadness, and donned the white one in token of joy, and to show that all stains of original sin were washed away. He addressed Raimondo by name and put the three solemn questions to him; to which the godfather responded—

'*Credo, credo, credo.*'

The chapel was singularly sonorous. Through a high oval window a band of sunshine streamed down upon a marble slab, under which was the deep vault in which many of my forefathers slept their last sleep. My mother and brother were side by side behind Giovanni; Maria and Natalia, curious to see the baby, stood on tiptoe, smiled, whispered to one another from time to time. Giovanni would turn now and then at these whisperings with a benign expression, in which was evident all the ineffable tenderness for children with which the great heart of this deserted grandfather overflowed.

'*Raymunde, vis baptizari?*' asked the priest.

'*Volo,*' responded the godfather, repeating it after the priest.

The priest took up the silver basin in which the waters of baptism sparkled. My mother removed the infant's cap while the godfather held it ready for ablution. The little round head hung over the basin; and the priest, taking up some of the water in a small shell, poured it three times over the infant's head, making the sign of the cross each time.

'*Ego te baptizo in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus sancti.*'

Raimondo broke into a loud cry, and louder still, while his head was being dried. And as Giovanni raised him again, I saw the little face purple with the rush of blood, and the mouth distorted by his angry screams. His crying always aroused in me the same lacerating pain, the same fierce exasperation. Nothing about him irritated me so much as his voice, as that persistent wailing which had wrung my nerves so cruelly the first time I heard it in the

lugubrious October dawn. It was to me simply intolerable.

The priest now dipped his thumb in the sacred chrism and anointed the forehead of the newly-baptized infant, reciting meanwhile the formula belonging to that ritual, which was almost drowned by the baby's cries. He then invested it in the white robe, the symbol of innocence.

'*Accipe vestem candidum*——'

And placing the consecrated candle in the hand of the godfather—

'*Accipe lampadem ardentem*——'

The Innocent stilled his crying and fixed his eyes on the flame that flickered at the top of the tall, coloured wax candle. Giovanni di Scordio, holding on his right arm the newly-made Christian, and in his left hand the symbol of divine fire, stood in a grave and simple attitude gazing at the officiating priest, and overtopping the rest of the assembled witnesses by a head.

'*Vade in pace, et Dominus sit tecum.*'

'*Amen.*'

My mother took the Innocent from the arms of the old man, and clasping it to her bosom, kissed it. My brother next kissed it, and then the others in turn.

Pietro, still on his knees beside me, was in tears. Beside myself with a thousand conflicting emotions, I started to my feet, rushed through the passage, and burst into Giuliana's room.

'Oh, sir, what has happened?' asked Cristina in an alarmed whisper.

'Nothing, nothing. Is she awake?'

'No, sir; she seems to be asleep.'

I drew the curtains apart and softly entered the

alcove. For the first moment, I could see nothing in the shadow but the whiteness of the pillows. I approached the bed and leaned over. Giuliana's eyes were wide open, staring fixedly at me. From my face she doubtless divined all my anguish, but she did not speak. Then she closed her eyes once more as if never to open them again.

CHAPTER XL

WITH that day began the last headlong period of that lucid madness which was to bring me to my crime. From that day I began seriously pondering the easiest and safest means for compassing the death of the Victim.

It was a premeditation—cold, keen, unshrinking—which absorbed my every faculty, possessed me wholly with a strength and tenacity that were incredible. While my whole being was in a state of turmoil, that fixed idea led me undeviatingly towards the goal. The acuteness of my mind seemed trebled; nothing escaped me whether within or outside myself. My caution never relaxed for one moment. Nothing that I did, nothing that I said, could possibly have roused suspicion or excited surprise. I dissembled unceasingly, not only before my mother and the rest, but also before Giuliana.

To her I pretended to be resigned, pacified, sometimes almost oblivious. I studiously avoided all allusion to the intruder; sought, by every means, to cheer, to inspire her with confidence, to induce her to carry out the orders laid down for improving her health. I redoubled my affectionate attentions, offering her a tenderness so profound and so self-forgetful that it could not fail to awaken in her a fresher, truer taste for life. Once again I had a

sensation of transfusing my blood into that wasted form, of communicating to her a little of my strength, of giving an impetus to that languid heart. It was I who spurred her on to live from day to day, breathing into her a fictitious vigour till the tragic and liberating hour should strike. 'To-morrow!' I would say to myself. And to-morrow came and passed, and still that hour tarried. And again I would repeat, 'To-morrow!'

I was convinced that the life of the mother depended on the death of the child. I was persuaded that the intruder once removed she would recover. 'It is impossible that she should not recover,' I argued. 'She will revive, will be regenerated little by little, will regain new blood. She will seem a creature new born, cleansed of all impurity. Both will feel ourselves purified, worthy one of the other, after an expiation so long and so dolorous. Her illness, her convalescence will relegate the painful recollection into the dim distance. And I will wipe from her soul the last shadow of that recollection; she shall find perfect oblivion in my love. Every other human love will seem futile compared with ours after so great a trial.' The vision of the future inflamed my impatience; this uncertainty became intolerable. The deed became void of all horror in my mind. I reproached myself severely for lingering so long over my doubts and cautions; and still no light had been cast upon my perplexity, I had not yet succeeded in determining what *means* to employ.

It was imperative that Raimondo should appear to have died a natural death. It was imperative that the doctor should have no shadow of suspicion. Of

the various methods I proposed to myself, not one appeared feasible or practicable. And all the time that I waited for the revealing flash, the luminous inspiration, a strange fascination attracted me towards the Victim.

Often I would enter the nursery unexpectedly, my heart beating so that I feared the nurse would hear it. Her name was Anna. She was a woman from Montegorgo Pausula, a member of a splendid race of mountaineers. There were times when she had all the aspect of a Cybele of bronze, to whom only the turreted crown was wanting. She wore the costume of her part of the country; a scarlet petticoat falling in a thousand straight symmetrical folds, and a black bodice covered with gold embroidery, from which hung two long sleeves, into which she rarely put her arms. Her head rose sombre and grand out of her snow-white chemisette, but the whites of her eyes and her dazzling teeth far outshone the brilliancy of the linen. Her eyes, like polished enamel, remained nearly always motionless, staring, without speculation, without one gleam of fancy. The mouth was large, full, taciturn, lighted up by two rows of strong, even teeth. The hair, so black that it showed gleams of purple, was parted over the low, broad forehead, and done in two plaits, which were twisted up behind each ear like the horns of a ram. She was almost always to be found sitting nursing the baby in a statuesque attitude, neither grave nor gay.

The room was, for the most part, in shadow, and when I went in I would see the white bundle lying in the arms of the sombre, imposing woman who fixed the inanimate eyes of an idol upon me, neither speaking nor smiling.

I would occasionally remain there for a long time

watching the baby at her breast, its soft cheeks following the movement of its lips, its throat pulsating with every mouthful it drew, its little face almost disappearing in the bosom to which it was pressed. It seemed to me that with every mouthful of that fresh, healthy, and vigorous milk the vitality of the intruder became more tenacious, more resistant, more malefic; and it was with a sort of dull resentment that I noticed how he grew and flourished and showed no sign of any disturbance in health. 'But surely,' I thought, 'all the agitation, all the suffering of his mother before his birth, must have been injurious to him? May he not have some organic mischief which will develop later on and kill him?'

One day, finding him lying undressed in his cradle, overcoming my repugnance, I touched him, examined him from head to foot, laid my ear upon the tiny chest, and listened to his heart. He drew up his little legs and kicked vigorously; jerked his dimpled arms; stuffed his fingers with their tiny transparent nails into his mouth.

More often, however, I watched him while he slept, gazed long at him, pondering and repondering over the *means*, lingering over the vision of the little shrouded corpse lying among wreaths of white chrysanthemums, and two lighted candles at the head and foot of the bier. He enjoyed the most tranquil sleep: lying on his back, his little closed fists with thumbs turned inwards on his chest. From time to time the moist lips would make the motion of sucking. If the innocence of those slumbers ever touched my heart, if the unconscious movement of those lips ever tended to melt me, I said to myself firmly, as if to strengthen me in my resolve, 'He must die.' And

then I represented to myself the sufferings he had already occasioned, and the affection he usurped, ousting my own children from their rightful place, and Giuliana's misery, and all the unhappiness and the danger contained in the dark cloud that hung over our heads. Thus I fanned the flame of my murderous intention, thus I again passed sentence of death on the sleeping child. And in a corner in the shadow sat the woman from Montegorgo, watching, silent, motionless as an image; and the whites of her eyes and her white teeth glittered no less than the great gold circlets in her ears.

CHAPTER XLI

ONE evening (it was the 14th of December), as Federico and I were returning to La Badiola, we noticed a man on the path in front of us, whom we presently recognised as Giovanni di Scordio.

'Giovanni!' my brother called out to him.

The old man stopped and waited for us to come up to him.

'Good-evening, Giovanni; what is the news?'

The old man smiled timidly, uneasily, almost as if we had caught him in some nefarious act.

'I was coming,' he stammered; 'I was coming—about my godson.'

He was very nervous, and seemed on the point of asking pardon for such a liberty.

'Did you want to see him?' asked Federico in low tones, as if making a confidential proposition, having no doubt understood the sad yet tender sentiment which moved the heart of the lonely old grandfather.

'No, no—I only came to inquire——'

'Then you do not want to see him?'

'No—yes—it would disturb him perhaps—at this hour——'

'Come along,' said Federico conclusively, taking him by the hand like a child. 'Come and see him.'

We all went into the house together and mounted to the nursery.

My mother was there. She smiled kindly at Giovanni and signed to us not to make a noise. 'He is asleep,' she said.

Then, turning to me, she added with a shade of uneasiness in her voice, 'Towards evening to-day he coughed a little.'

The news startled me, and my perturbation was so evident that my mother hastened to reassure me.

'Only a little, you know; scarcely worth mentioning; nothing to be alarmed about.'

Federico and the old man meanwhile had gone over to the cradle and were looking at the little sleeper under the subdued light of the lamp. Giovanni was bending low over the child.

'Kiss him,' whispered Federico.

The old man raised himself and looked at my mother and me with an air of bewilderment; then he slowly passed one hand over his mouth and his badly shaven chin.

'If I do,' he said in a low voice to my brother, with whom he was more at his ease, 'I shall be sure to scratch him, and he will wake.'

But my brother, seeing how the poor forsaken old man was struggling with his desire to kiss the baby, encouraged him with a sign. And so the grand old head bent over the cradle gently, gently, gently.

CHAPTER XLII

WHEN my mother and I were left alone in the room beside the cradle where Raimondo slept on peacefully with Giovanni's kiss upon his brow, she said, in her compassionate way—

'Poor old man! Do you know that he comes nearly every evening? But quite stealthily. Pietro told me he had seen him lurking about outside the house. On the day of the christening he asked to have the window of this room pointed out to him from the garden; no doubt that he might come and look at it. Poor old man! How sorry I am for him!'

I listened to Raimondo's breathing. It did not sound in any way different; his sleep was perfectly undisturbed.

'So he coughed to-day——' I said.

'Yes, Tullio, a little—nothing worth speaking of.'

'Has he taken cold perhaps?'

'I do not see how he could possibly take cold, with so many precautions.'

An idea flashed across my mind. A sudden trembling fell upon me, and my mother's presence became almost insupportable. I was dazed, confused, was afraid of betraying myself, so violent was the shock of that lightning thought, 'Something of it must be apparent in my face.' My fear was unfounded, but

I could not overcome it. I advanced to the cradle and leaned over it.

Something, indeed, my mother did notice, but interpreted it in my favour.

'How nervous you are!' she said. 'Listen how quietly he breathes; do you not see how well he sleeps?'

But in spite of what she said, there was a certain uneasiness in her tone, and she could not wholly conceal her apprehensions from me.

'Yes, you are quite right; it can be nothing,' I answered, drawing myself together. 'Are you going to stay here?'

'Yes, till Anna returns.'

'Well, I am going.'

I left her and hurried to Giuliana. She was expecting me. Everything was ready for her dinner, at which I was in the habit of joining her, that the little invalid meal might be less dull for her, and that my example and my attentions might encourage her to eat. In all my actions and my words this evening, I was over excited, uneven, almost high-spirited. I was devoured by a strange, nervous exaltation, was hardly conscious of what I did, and could not govern myself exactly, though able to analyse my sensations. Contrary to my usual habits, I drank two or three glasses of the Burgundy ordered for Giuliana by the doctor. I tried to persuade her to drink a little more than she generally did.

'You do feel a little better, do you not?'

'Oh yes.'

'If you are very good and obedient, I promise you shall get up for Christmas Day. We have ten days more till then. In ten days, if you like, you shall be

quite well and strong. Another mouthful of wine, Giuliana!'

She looked at me in some surprise, in some curiosity, making an effort to give me her whole attention. For she was already tired, and her eyelids were growing heavy. A sitting posture still brought on, after a certain time, symptoms of faintness.

She put her lips to the glass of wine I offered her.

'Tell me,' I resumed, 'where would you like to go for your convalescence?'

She smiled faintly.

'To the Riviera? Shall I write to Augusto Arici to get us a villa? If only Villa Ginosa were to be had! Do you remember?'

She smiled again, but more faintly.

'Are you tired? Does my talking worry you?'

I saw that she was on the point of fainting. Putting my arm round her, I drew away the pillows at her back, and laid her gently down with her head low, and had recourse to the usual restoratives. In a little while she came round again. She murmured as in a dream—

'Yes, yes—let us go——'

CHAPTER XLIII

A NAMELESS unrest possessed me. Sometimes it affected me pleasantly, sending my spirits up with a rush; sometimes it took the form of keenest impatience, intolerable irritation; again it was a fierce longing to find some one to whom I could speak, could unburden myself. Or I would pine for solitude; to be able to shut myself up in some hidden spot, there to examine my thoughts, to develop my schemes, to consider carefully every detail of the coming event and prepare myself for it. These numerous and contradictory impulses, and others more indefinite, more inexplicable, still succeeded one another with giddy rapidity in my mind, accelerating the processes of my inner life to an extraordinary degree.

The flash that entered my brain, that wave of sinister light, seemed to have suddenly illumined some state of inner consciousness which, though plunged in shadow, was nevertheless pre-existent; to have awakened some profound and dormant stratum of my memory. I felt that I was *remembering*; but do what I would, I could not succeed in retracing the memory to its source, nor in determining its nature. I only knew for certain that *I remembered.* Was it something I had read long ago?—the description in some book of an analogous case? Or had some one

told it me as having happened in real life? Or was the sentiment merely illusory—the effect of a mysterious association of ideas? Certainly, the *means* I was to employ seemed to me to have been suggested by some one else. I felt that some one had suddenly come to me and relieved me of all perplexity by saying, '*You must do thus and thus, as that other person did under the same circumstances.*' But who was that *other person*? Surely I must have known him somewhere. But make what efforts I would, I was unable to detach him from myself, to render him objective. It is impossible for me to define accurately the condition of mind in which I found myself. I had a completely formed picture of an occurrence at every point of its development, that is to say, of a series of actions carried out by a man while putting a given proposition into effect. But the man himself, my predecessor, was unknown to me; and yet I could not associate the relative ideas with this picture except by putting myself in his place. Thus I saw myself carrying out the particular actions already accomplished by another man, imitating the conduct pursued by another under circumstances similar to mine. The sense of spontaneity, of originality, was wholly wanting in me.

When I left Giuliana's room, I spent some minutes wandering aimlessly about the passages. I met nobody. I then turned my steps towards the nursery; I listened at the door; I heard the subdued tones of my mother's voice, and immediately went away.

Had she never moved from there? Perhaps the baby had had a more serious fit of coughing? I knew well what the bronchial catarrh of infants was

like, the terrible malady with such deceptively innocent appearances. I remembered the danger Maria had been in from it in the third month of her life; I had not forgotten one of its symptoms. Maria, too, had only sneezed once or twice at the beginning, and had a slight cough; had shown much tendency to sleep. 'Who knows!' I said to myself, 'if I wait, if I do not let myself be carried away, *Providence* may intervene in time, and I shall be saved.' I turned back, listened once more, heard my mother speak, entered the room.

'Well, how is Raimondo now?' I asked, without seeking to hide my anxiety.

'Very well; he has not coughed again; his breathing is quite regular, his temperature normal. He is taking the milk well, you see.'

My mother seemed perfectly reassured and easy in her mind.

Anna was seated on the bed nursing the child, who was drinking greedily with a little clucking sound from time to time. Anna's head was bent, her eyes fixed upon the floor, in statue-like immobility. The wavering flame of the lamp cast moving lights and shadows on her red gown.

'Is it not too warm in here?' I said, feeling half stifled.

It was very hot in the room; in a corner round a stove some baby-linen was airing; there was a bubbling of boiling water; from time to time the windows rattled under the gusts of wind that whistled and roared round the house.

'What a gale!' exclaimed my mother.

I no longer heard the other sounds. I listened to the wind with anxious intentness, and a shiver ran

through me as if a thread of the outer cold had suddenly pierced my marrow. I went to the window and opened a shutter with trembling fingers. I leaned my forehead against the icy glass and tried to look out, but the sudden dimness produced by my breath upon the pane prevented me. Lifting my eyes, I caught the glitter of the starry sky through the window higher up.

'It is a very fine night,' I said, retreating from the embrasure of the window.

And while my eyes rested upon Raimondo still at the nurse's breast, I had a vision of the ominous adamantine night outside.

'Did Giuliana eat her dinner this evening?' asked my mother fondly.

'Yes,' I answered, steeling my heart; for I could not refrain from thinking: 'All this evening you have not found one moment to come and see her! And it is not the first time that you have neglected her; you have given all your heart to Raimondo!'

CHAPTER XLIV

THE following morning Dr. Jemma examined the baby and pronounced him to be in perfect health. He attached no importance to the fact of his having coughed, as reported by mother. However, smiling at our excessive precautions and anxiety, he recommended care during these days of intense cold, more especially while the infant was being bathed.

He spoke of these things before Giuliana, and I was present. Two or three times our eyes met in a fleeting glance.

So *Providence* was not coming to our aid. I must act, must seize the first opportune moment, must hasten the event. I made up my mind resolutely. I would wait for the evening, and then deliberately accomplish the deed.

I therefore collected all my energies, sharpened my wits, was studiously careful in all I said or did. No word, no act of mine should arouse suspicion or surprise. My caution never relaxed for a moment. I had not one moment of sentimental weakness. All my sensibilities were compressed, stifled. My every faculty was concentrated upon the practical solution of a problem. It was imperative that for some minutes this evening I should be alone with the intruder, and that under certain given circumstances of security from interruption.

I went into the nursery several times during the day, and always found Anna sitting impassively at her post. If I asked her any question, she answered in monosyllables. Her voice was rather harsh, with a singular resonance in it. Her silence, her inertia irritated me.

She hardly ever went away except for her meals, and was always replaced by my mother, Miss Edith, Cristina, or one or other of the women-servants. In the latter case, I might easily get rid of the undesirable company by sending the woman away on some errand. But there would still remain the danger of some one coming in unexpectedly meanwhile. In any case, I was at the mercy of chance, as I could not choose Anna's substitute. In all probability, like this evening, so on the coming evenings, it would be my mother. And yet, how was I possibly to prolong my vigilance and my anxiety indefinitely, to live in continual expectation of the dread hour?

While I was still racking my brain for some way out of my perplexity, Miss Edith came in with Maria and Natalia. The two little Graces, excited by their run in the open air, buttoned up warmly in their sable coats, with caps of the same fur on their silken curls, their cheeks rosy with the cold, instantly threw themselves upon me with shouts of delight; and for some minutes the room was full of their gay chatter.

'Do you know,' announced Maria, 'the *montanari* have come? The Christmas *Novena* begins this evening in the chapel. Oh, you should see what a beautiful Bethlehem Pietro has made! Grandmama has promised us a tree, hasn't she, Miss Edith? We

ought to put it in mama's room. Mama will be well by Christmas, won't she? Oh, do make her get well!'

Natalia had stopped to look at Raimondo, who was kicking his legs incessantly, as if trying to get rid of his swaddling bands.

'I want to hold him!' she cried, suddenly taken with a fancy.

She was all impatience, and gathered up all her strength in order to sustain his weight upon her arms; and her face grew serious as when she played the little mother to her doll.

'My turn now,' cried Maria.

The little brother passed from one to the other without a murmur; but all at once, while she was walking about with him, anxiously watched over by Miss Edith, he very nearly slipped out of her arms. Edith caught him in time and gave him back to the nurse, who had been sitting plunged in profound reverie, far removed from everybody and everything around her.

'So the *Novena* begins this evening?' I said, following out my own train of thought.

'Yes, yes, this evening.'

I glanced at Anna, who seemed to have pricked up her ears, and to be listening with unwonted eagerness to the conversation.

'How many musicians are there?'

'Five,' answered Maria, who was evidently minutely informed of everything. 'Two bagpipes, two clarinettes, and one fife. They come from your mountains,' she added, turning to Anna; 'perhaps there is some one from Montegorgo.'

The woman's eyes had lost their hard glitter, were

alive, beamed sadly through a veil of tears. Her whole face was changed by an expression of extraordinary feeling. And then I understood the poor thing was suffering, and the name of her malady was nostalgia.

CHAPTER XLV

EVENING was drawing nigh. I went down to the chapel to look at the preparations for the *Novena*—the Bethlehem, the flowers, the pure white candles. In a purposeless manner I wandered out of doors and looked up at the windows of Raimondo's nursery; then I paced up and down rapidly, hoping to overcome the convulsive tremor, the piercing cold that penetrated my bones.

The twilight was glacial, the air cut one like a sword. A band of livid green spread along the distant horizon beyond the leaden-hued valley through which the Assoro wound its tortuous way.

My heart suddenly grew faint within me. 'Can I be afraid?' I thought. I felt as if some one were gazing into my very soul. 'Am I afraid? Of what?—of the deed itself, or of being discovered by some one?' I trembled at the shadow of the tall trees, at the vast expanse of sky, at the cold gleam of the Assoro, at all the vague voices of the country. The Angelus began to ring. I fled into the house as if from pursuit.

In the still unlighted hall I came upon my mother.

'Where have you come from, Tullio?'

'From out of doors—I was taking a turn in the open air.'

'Giuliana is waiting for you.'

'When does the *Novena* begin?'

'At six o'clock.'

It was now a quarter-past five, so I had still three-quarters of an hour—I must keep a good look-out.

'I am going upstairs, mama.' After a step or two I called back to her: 'Has Federico come home yet?'

'No.'

I proceeded to Giuliana's room. She was expecting me, and Cristina was busy preparing the little table.

'Where have you been all this long time?' asked the poor invalid in a tone of gentle reproach.

'I was with Maria and Natalia. I went to see the chapel.'

'Ah yes, the *Novena* begins this evening,' she murmured sadly.

'I daresay you can hear the music from here.'

She remained pensive for some moments. She seemed very sad, the kind of melting sadness that is the outcome of a heart swelling with tears, an urgent inclination to weep.

'What are you pondering over?' I asked.

'I was thinking of my first Christmas at La Badiola. Do you remember it?'

She was greatly moved. She appealed to all my tenderness; clung to me that I might pet her, coax her, cheer her drooping spirits, and kiss away her tears. 'But I dare not encourage her,' I thought to myself anxiously. 'I must not let her keep me too long. Time is flying. If I once let her hold me fast, it will be difficult to get away. If she begins to cry, I shall not have the heart to leave her. I must keep a tight hand on myself. The time is getting

short. Who will stay beside Raimondo, I wonder? Not my mother, I am certain; probably the nurse. All the others will be assembled in the chapel. I shall send Cristina here, so that I shall be quite safe. Circumstances could not have fallen out more favourably for me. In twenty minutes from now, I must be free.'

I did my utmost to avoid exciting the invalid further; pretended not to follow her; did not respond to her effusion; tried to divert her attention from emotional subjects; arranged so that Cristina should not leave us alone, as she was in the habit of doing in the evenings; and displayed an exaggerated solicitude about the meal.

'But why are you not joining me at dinner this evening?' she asked.

'I would rather not have anything just now; I do not feel very well. You eat something though—please do!'

With all my efforts, I did not quite succeed in hiding the agitation which devoured me. Several times she looked at me with the evident desire to penetrate the mystery. Then, all at once, her face clouded, and she remained silent. She scarcely touched the food, hardly did more than put her lips to the wineglass. Presently I gathered up all my courage and resolved to go. Pretending to have heard the sound of carriage wheels, I listened, and then said—

'I expect that is Federico. I must see him at once. Do you mind if I leave you for a moment—Cristina will be here?'

Her face quivered as if she were just going to burst into tears. I did not wait for her answer, but hurried

off, though not without impressing on Cristina that she was to stay with her mistress till I returned,

The moment I was outside the room, I was forced to stand still to overcome, if possible, the suffocating beating of my heart. 'If I do not succeed in controlling my nerves,' I thought, 'I am lost.' I listened intently, but could hear nothing save the thunder of my pulses. I advanced down the passage as far as the staircase. I met no one. There was not a sound to be heard in the house. 'Everybody must be in the chapel now, even the servants,' I said to myself. 'There is nothing to be feared on that score.' I waited two or three minutes longer to compose myself; and in those few minutes the tension of my mind relaxed. I felt strangely dazed; vague, purposely thoughts floated through my head, quite irrelevant to the deed I was about to accomplish. Mechanically, I counted the rails of the balustrade.

'Anna is sure to have stayed with the baby. The nursery is not far from the chapel; we shall easily hear when the *Novena* begins.' I directed my steps towards the nursery, but before I reached the door I heard the first notes of the bagpipes. I entered without hesitation: I had not been mistaken in my surmise.

Anna was standing beside her chair, and in such an attitude that I instantly divined she had that moment started to her feet at the first strains of the music of her mountain home, the prelude to the ancient religious pastoral.

'Is he asleep?' I asked.

She only nodded in reply.

The music continued, somewhat veiled by distance, a little harsh, long drawn, droning, but soothing as a

dream. The clear voices of the flutes piped the artless unforgetable melody to the accompaniment.

'You go down to the chapel too,' I said to her. 'I will stay here. When did he go to sleep?'

'Only just now.'

'Very well; you go to the *Novena*.'

Her eyes sparkled.

'May I?'

'Yes, yes; I will stay with the child.'

I opened the door for her myself, and shut it after her. Then I ran to the cradle on tiptoe and peered in. The Innocent was sleeping peacefully, his little fists clenched, and the thumbs turned inwards. To me, the grey eyes were visible through the closed lids. But I felt no trace of my former blind hatred and rage against him. My aversion for him was less keen than it had ever been before. I had none of that instinctive impulse towards some act of criminal violence which, more than once, had made my fingers tingle. I was merely obeying the promptings of a cold and lucid will, in perfect consciousness of what I was doing.

I returned to the door, opened it, looked out, and assured myself that the corridor was empty. I hastened over to the window. I suddenly remembered what my mother had said, and it flashed across me that Giovanni di Scordio might be down below in the garden. With extreme caution I opened the window; a blast of icy air rushed in. I leaned over the window sill and explored the vicinity; not a suspicious shape was to be seen, not a sound to be heard but the penetrating strains of the Novena music. I retreated, approached the cradle, overcoming by a violent effort my extreme repugnance, lifted the baby

very very gently, and holding it away from my side where my heart beat like a sledge-hammer, I carried it to the open window and exposed it to the death-dealing air.

I was not in the least agitated; not one of my senses was blurred. I saw the stars throbbing in the sky as if blown about by some celestial hurricane; I saw the fluttering, ghostly shadows cast by the moving light of the lamp in the portico; I distinctly heard the refrain of the carol, the barking of a dog in the distance. A little convulsive shiver from the child made me start. He was going to wake.

'Now he will cry,' I thought. 'How long have we been here? A minute maybe—perhaps not even that. Will so short an exposure as that be sufficient to kill him? Has it affected him at all?' The baby stretched its arms out, its mouth twitched—opened—hesitated a moment before the cry came which sounded to me changed: feebler, more quavering; but that was perhaps only because I heard it in a different atmosphere from what I had ever done before. That weak, tremulous cry filled me with a blind, mad terror. I flew to the cradle and laid the child in it; returned to shut the window, but before doing so, leaned far out and cast a piercing glance into the darkness. I saw nothing but the stars. I closed the window, performing all these actions—in spite of my panic—without a sound. And behind me the baby wailed and wailed ever louder. 'Am I safe?' I ran to the door, looked out into the passage, listened; the passage was deserted; a slow wave of sound floated up to me from the chapel.

'So I am safe! No one can have seen me.' Once more I thought of Giovanni di Scordio looking up

at the window, and I had a tremor of uneasiness. But no, I looked twice, there was no one down there. I went over to the cradle again, settled the baby more comfortably, covered him up with care, assured myself that nothing was out of its place. Now, however, I had an invincible repugnance to touching him. He cried and cried—what was I to do to quiet him? I sat down and waited.

But that continuous cry in the great lonely room, that inarticulate plaint of my hapless victim, pierced my heart with such agonising distress that I started to my feet again, blindly seeking some way of fleeing my torments. I went out into the passage, leaving the door slightly open behind me, and stood there on the watch. The child's voice reached me only faintly, mingled with the slow wave of music which spread through the great quiet house, losing itself at last in the most far-away rooms. Did Giuliana hear it, I wondered. What was she thinking and suffering? Was she weeping? I know not why, but my heart told me for certain—She is weeping.

Thoughts and images rushed in confusion through my brain—incoherent, fragmentary, absurd, composed of elements that bore no relation to one another, fleeting, illusory. A sudden fear assailed me that I was going mad. 'How much time has elapsed?' I asked myself; and I found that I had lost all notion of time.

The music ceased. 'The service is over,' I thought. 'Anna will be coming up directly—my mother as well perhaps. Raimondo has stopped crying!' I re-entered the nursery, cast a searching glance around to reassure myself once more that no traces of my crime were visible. I stole to the cradle, not without

a vague fear of finding the baby dead. But he was sleeping quietly, his little fists clenched, and the thumbs turned inwards. 'He is asleep! It is incredible. It looks as if nothing had occurred.' That which I had done seemed to assume the insubstantiality of a dream. A sudden lapse came in my thoughts, an interval of blankness—I waited.

The moment I heard the nurse's heavy footstep in the passage, I hastened to meet her. My mother was not with her. Without raising my eyes to her face, I said—

'He is still asleep.'

And I beat a rapid retreat—saved!

CHAPTER XLVI

A SORT of stupid inertia took possession of my mind from that moment, doubtless because I was exhausted, worn out, incapable of further effort. My consciousness lost its terrible lucidity, my attention flagged, was unequal to the strain of closely following the course of events. My recollection is therefore dim and confused, made up of scattered fragments.

When I returned to the alcove that evening, I sank on a chair at Giuliana's bedside, and remained some time without speaking. Words came to me with difficulty. Presently I asked her, looking closely at her face, 'Have you been crying?'

'No,' she replied.

But she was more depressed than when I left her, and as white as the sheet.

'What is the matter?' I asked.

'Nothing—and you?'

'Oh, I do not feel very well. My head aches badly.'

I was prostrate with fatigue; every limb felt heavy as lead. I laid my head on a corner of her pillow, and remained in that attitude for some minutes, oppressed by nameless pain. I started suddenly at the sound of Giuliana's voice saying to me—

'You are hiding something from me.'

'No, no; why do you say that?'

'Because I *feel* that you are.'

'No, no; you are mistaken.'

'Very well.'

I was silent, and leaned my head once more upon her pillow.

A minute or so passed, and then she suddenly said, 'You see *it* often.'

I raised my head and stared at her bewildered.

'Of your own free will you go and see it—go to the nursery just for that,' she continued. 'I know it. This evening too——'

'Well?'

'It frightens me—I am afraid for you—I know you. You torture yourself; you go there to eat out your heart—I know you—and it frightens me. You are not resigned, far from it; you never could be. You do not deceive me for a moment, Tullio. This evening, just now, you were there again——'

'How do you know?'

'I know, I *feel* it.'

My blood ran cold. 'What can I do? Would you have my mother suspect—would you have her notice my aversion?'

We both spoke under our breath. There were footsteps outside. 'Now,' I thought, 'here comes my mother beside herself to tell us Raimondo is dying!'

But it was Maria and Natalia with Miss Edith; and the alcove soon echoed with their twitterings. They described everything: the chapel, the decorations, the candles, the bagpipes, most minutely.

Pleading a bad headache, I left Giuliana and retired to my rooms. Here, fatigue got the upper

hand; I flung myself into bed and slept heavily for many hours.

The next morning's light found me calm, nay, strangely indifferent and void of curiosity. No one had come to disturb my slumbers, therefore nothing unusual could have happened. The events of the preceding evening seemed to have retreated into the dim and visionary past. I felt that there was an immense gulf between what I was and what I had been; that there was a gap between the present and the past in my mental existence. I made no attempt to collect myself, to examine this singular phenomenon. I was utterly averse to any activity, whether of mind or body; I sought only to preserve that species of fictitious apathy under which slumbered the consciousness of the dark tangle of emotions through which I had passed; would not investigate my thoughts that I might not awaken those things which seemed dead, which seemed not to belong to my actual existence. I was not unlike those invalids who, having lost all sensibility of one side of their body, imagine they have a corpse at their side in the bed.

Presently, however, Federico came knocking at my door. What news did he bring me? He entered, and his presence stirred me out of my torpor.

'We did not see each other last night,' said he. 'I came back late. How are you?'

'Pretty well.'

'You had a bad headache last night, had you not?'

'Yes. That is why I went early to bed.'

'You don't look very brilliant this morning either. Oh, dear me, when is this unfortunate state of things going to end? You are not well, Giuliana

is still in bed, and now I have just met mama, who is quite upset because Raimondo coughed last night!'

'Did he cough?'

'Yes. It is probably nothing but a slight cold; but, as usual, mama is in a state——'

'Has the doctor been?'

'Not yet. But, really, you seem worse than mama.'

'Well, you know, it is quite justifiable when a baby is in question—the least thing is enough——'

I caught his clear and limpid eyes fixed upon me, and they filled me with fear and shame.

The moment he was gone, I leaped out of bed. 'So the effects have begun already,' I thought; 'there can be no further doubt. But how long will he live? It is even possible that he will not die. Ah, no, it is impossible that he should not die. The air was icy; it froze one's breath.' And for an instant I saw the child before me, the little half-open mouth, the fragile throat——

CHAPTER XLVII

'NOT the slightest cause for alarm,' said the doctor. 'It is merely a very slight touch of cold. The bronchial tubes are quite free.' He bent once more over Raimondo's uncovered chest and listened. 'There is absolutely no trace of sound. You can assure yourself by putting your own ear to his chest,' and he turned to me.

I did so, and felt the gentle healthy warmth. 'Quite so——' and I looked at my mother, who was trembling with alarm at the other side of the cradle.

Not a symptom of bronchitis was there. The baby's breathing was normal; and although he had a slight cough at long intervals, he took his food as usual, and slept soundly. I myself was deceived by these appearances. 'So my attempt on his life has been fruitless? Apparently he is not going to die. What tenacious vitality!' And my original rancour against him returned with double force. His calm and rosy appearance exasperated me. Had I gone through so much anguish, exposed myself to such risks all for nothing? And with my dull rage there mingled a sort of superstitious wonder at the extraordinary tenacity of this life. 'I do not believe I should have the courage to begin it all over again. And what then? I shall be his victim; I shall not be able to escape him.' And the little perverse

phantasm; the bilious, feline child, full of intelligence and evil propensities, reappeared before me, and fixed me with his hard, grey eyes as if in defiance. The terrible scene in the twilight of the deserted room, the scene my hostile imagination had once created, presented itself to me again in bold relief, and assumed all the characteristics of reality.

It was a white day with a feeling of coming snow in the air. Giuliana's alcove was still a haven of refuge to me. The intruder might not leave his room, and therefore could not follow me in here. I abandoned myself to my wretchedness without any attempt at concealment.

Looking at my poor Giuliana, I thought to myself, 'She will never get well, will never rise from her bed.' Her strange words yesterday evening returned to my mind and perturbed me still more. Assuredly, the intruder was her destroyer as much as he was mine. She could think of nothing else, was dying of it inch by inch. Ah, what a weight upon so feeble a heart!

With the discontinuity of scenes in a dream, certain fragments of the days that were gone passed before my spirit, recollections of another illness, a distant convalescence. With lingering fondness I pieced the fragments together and reconstructed the picture of those days—so sad and yet so sweet—in which I had sown the seeds of my woeful harvest. The diffused white light reminded me of that long afternoon which Giuliana and I had spent together reading a book of poems, our heads bent over the same page, our eyes following the selfsame lines. And I saw her taper finger on the margin marking it with her nail.

'Accueillez la voix qui persiste
Dans son naïf épithalame.
Allez, rien n'est meilleur à l'âme
Que de faire une âme moins triste!'

And I had clasped her slender wrist, and slowly bending my head, had pressed my lips to her palm, murmuring—

'You——could forget?'

Whereat she laid her hand across my mouth and uttered her great watchword—'Silence!'

Why, why could I not tear these images from my soul? Regret was vain. '*Too late.*'

'What are you thinking about?' asked Giuliana, who, during my silence, had doubtless suffered in sympathy with my sadness.

I told her. With a voice that came from the depths of her sad bosom—faint, and yet more piercing than a shrill cry of anguish, she answered—

'And I, ah, I had all heaven for you in my heart!'

There was a long pause, during which she absorbed into her heart the tears she did not shed.

'But now,' she went on, 'I cannot console you! There is no consolation anywhere for either you or me, nor ever can be. All is lost.'

'Who knows!' said I.

And we looked at one another; and it was manifest that, at that moment, we were both thinking of the same thing—the possible death of Raimondo.

I hesitated an instant; then I asked, alluding to a conversation we had had one evening under the elms—

'Have you prayed to God?' My voice shook.

And she answered (I could scarcely hear it)—

'Yes.'

She closed her eyes, and turning on her side, buried her face in the pillow, and shrunk into herself under the bedclothes, as if suddenly stricken with cold.

CHAPTER XLVIII

TOWARDS evening I went to see Raimondo again. I found him in my mother's arms. He seemed to me rather pale, but otherwise unchanged, was breathing quietly, and showed no suspicious symptom of any kind.

'He has slept till now without waking,' said my mother.

'And does that make you uneasy?'

'Yes; he has never slept so long before.'

I looked attentively at the child. The grey eyes were open now, bnt dull and expressionless, and he moved his lips continuously as if sucking. Presently a mouthful of viscous milk came up and flowed down over his bib.

'Ah, no, no; that baby cannot be well!' exclaimed my mother, shaking her head.

'But has he coughed at all?'

As if in answer to me, Raimondo began to cough.

'Do you hear that?'

It was a little dry cough, unaccompanied by any internal sound. It only lasted a moment.

'We must have patience,' I thought to myself. But as the sinister forebodings waxed stronger in my mind, my aversion for the intruder diminished, my anger subsided, and I realised that my heart was cramped and miserable, and refused to rejoice at the success of my scheme.

That evening remains in my memory as the most wretched of any during the whole course of my misfortune.

Wondering whether Giovanni di Scordio might not be lurking near the house, I went out and explored the avenue in which my brother and I had met him that time. There was a promise of the first snow in the clear brightness of the twilight; a thick carpet of leaves lay under the double line of trees whose bare branches showed a jagged outline against the sky.

I looked about me, hoping to catch sight of the old man. I thought of his tender devotion to his godson—that last forlorn love of old age—of the great hard rough hands that I had seen grow gentle and timidly caressing as they touched the little white bundle in the cradle. 'How he will grieve!' I thought. And I saw the little corpse lying amidst the wreaths of white chrysanthemums and the lighted candles, and Giovanni on his knees beside it weeping bitterly. 'My mother, too, will be in despair; the whole house will be cast into mourning. It will be a funereal Christmas. What will Giuliana say when I appear in the alcove, at the foot of her bed, and bring her the news—"He is dead"?'

I had reached the end of the avenue; there was no one in sight. The landscape was sinking slowly, silently into shadow; a red light gleamed upon one of the hills in the distance. I turned to retrace my steps. Suddenly, something white floated before my eyes and vanished—it was the first snow.

A little later, as I sat by Giuliana's bedside, the sound of the rustic pipes reached us again from the chapel, where they were continuing the *Novena*. It was *the selfsame hour*.

CHAPTER XLIX

THAT evening passed, and the night and the following morning, and still nothing unusual had occurred. When the doctor saw the baby, however, he acknowledged that there was a slight nasal catarrh, also affecting the bronchial tubes, but the whole thing was of the most trifling nature. Nevertheless, I could see that he was trying to conceal a certain uneasiness. He gave a few instructions, enjoined the utmost precaution, and promised to look in again in the course of the day. My mother was not reassured.

I went back to Giuliana. 'Worse,' I murmured under my breath without meeting her eye.

Neither of us spoke for a long time. Now and again, I rose and went to the window to look at the snow, or roamed about the room, a prey to intolerable anxiety. Giuliana kept her head buried in the pillows; she seemed to be almost hiding under the bedclothes. Whenever I came near her, she opened her eyes and shot a rapid glance at me, which I was unable to decipher.

'Are you cold?' I asked.

'Yes.'

But the room was quite warm. I kept going back to the window to watch the landscape slowly whitening under the persistent downfall of soft flakes.

It was about two in the afternoon. What was happening in the nursery? Surely nothing unusual, or they would have come to call me. My uneasiness increased to such a pitch that I determined to go and see for myself. I opened the door.

'Where are you going?' cried Giuliana sharply, raising herself on her elbow.

'*Over there*—just a minute—I will come back directly.'

She did not move, but stared at me with blanched face.

'Don't you want me to go?' I asked.

'No; stay with me.'

She did not lie down again. A strange look of terror swept over her face; her eyes wandered restlessly as if following some flitting shadow. Going over to her, I made her lie down again, and placing my hand on her forehead, I asked her fondly, 'What is it, Giuliana?'

'I don't know—I am frightened——'

'Of what?'

'I don't know. I can't help it—I am ill—I feel like that.'

But her eyes still wandered restlessly about the room instead of meeting mine.

'What are you looking for? Do you see anything?'

'No—nothing.'

I laid my hand again upon her forehead; her temperature seemed natural, and yet I began to feel strangely disturbed about her.

'See, dear, I am not going to leave you—I will stay with you.'

I sat down and waited. My soul hung suspended

in agonised expectation of some imminent event. I was quite certain that some one would come and call me presently. My ear was acutely attentive to the faintest sound. From time to time a bell rang in the house. I heard the dull rumble of carriage wheels on the snow.

'Perhaps that is the doctor,' I said.

Giuliana seemed to hold her breath. We waited. An indefinite time passed. Suddenly there was a noise of opening doors; steps approached rapidly. I leapt to my feet; Giuliana started up in bed at the same moment.

'What can have happened?'

But I knew well what it was; I even knew the exact words the person would say who was hurrying to the room.

Cristina came in. She looked distracted, but did her utmost to conceal her agitation. She stood in the doorway and looked at me.

'One moment, please, sir,' she stammered.

I left the alcove. 'What is it?'

'The baby is taken worse,' she whispered. 'Come, quick.'

'Giuliana, I must leave you for a moment, but Cristina will stay with you. I shall be back directly.'

Once outside the door, I ran at full speed to the nursery.

My mother was bending over the cradle. 'Oh, Tullio, the baby is dying!' she cried distractedly. 'Look at him, look at him!'

I too bent over the cradle. A change—sudden, unexpected, apparently inexplicable and appalling, had come over the child. The little face was ashen grey, the lips livid, all the light gone out of the eyes,

faded, blank. The poor little creature seemed to be under the influence of some virulent poison.

In a voice broken with sobs, my mother began telling me the circumstances: 'An hour ago he was comparatively well. He coughed a little certainly, but that was all. I went away for a short time and left him with Anna. I thought he would be asleep when I came back—he seemed very sleepy—and this is how I found him. Feel him—he is almost cold!'

I felt his forehead, his cheek; the temperature certainly seemed to have lowered.

'And the doctor?'

'He has not been here again yet. I have sent for him.'

'You should have sent a messenger on horseback.'

'Yes, Ciriaco has gone.'

'On horseback? Are you sure? There is not a moment to be lost.'

My anxiety was not feigned—I was perfectly sincere. I could not let this innocent victim die without help, without making some attempt to save it. Confronted with that little corpse-like face, now that my crime was nearing its accomplishment, my very soul was rent with pity, remorse, and pain. I was hardly less distraught than my mother while we waited for the doctor. I rang the bell. When the servant answered it, I asked—

'Has Ciriaco gone?'

'Yes, sir.'

'On foot?'

'No, sir, in the carriage.'

At that moment Federico rushed in panting. 'What has happened?' he gasped.

'The baby is dying!' cried my mother, still leaning over the cradle.

Federico hurried over and looked in.

'Why, he is suffocating,' he said. 'Don't you see—he is not breathing.' And catching up the baby, he lifted it out of the cradle and shook it.

'Don't, don't; what are you doing? You are killing it,' screamed my mother.

Here the door opened, and a servant announced—'The doctor.'

Doctor Jemma hurried in. 'I was just coming here, and met the messenger on the way. What is it?'

Without waiting for an answer, he went to my brother, who was still holding Raimondo in his arms, took the baby from him, looked at it, and his face fell.

'There—there,' he said soothingly, 'we must undress him.' Then laying the child on the nurse's bed, he helped my mother to remove its clothes.

When the little body was uncovered, it proved to be of the same ashen hue as the face. The limbs hung limp and flaccid. The doctor's large hand passed over the skin here and there.

'Do something for him, doctor!' supplicated my mother. 'Save him!'

But the doctor seemed at a loss. He felt the child's pulse, laid his ear to its chest. 'Some heart defect—impossible,' he muttered. 'But how did this change come about?' he asked. 'Quite suddenly?'

My mother tried to tell him, but burst into tears before she had half finished. The doctor then resolved to make some attempt to get the baby out of the sort of coma into which it had fallen, trying to make it cry, to induce vomiting, to excite the respira-

tion. My mother looked on with wide staring eyes, from which the tears flowed unchecked.

'Does Giuliana know?' asked my brother.

'No—that is—perhaps—perhaps she has guessed—perhaps Cristina. You stay here. I will run and see to her, but I will come back again.'

I gave one last look at the baby in the doctor's hands, one look at my mother; then I fled from the room to Giuliana. 'What shall I tell her?' I said to myself when I reached the door—'the truth?' Entering the room, I caught sight of Cristina standing by the window; the curtains of the alcove were closed; I parted them and went in. Giuliana was cowering under the bedclothes. When I came to the bed, I found that she was shivering as if in a fit of ague.

'Giuliana, dearest—it is I.'

She uncovered her face and turned it towards me.

'Have you come from *there*?' she asked under her breath.

'Yes.'

'Tell me all.'

I was leaning over her, and as we spoke our faces were close together.

'It is going badly with him,' I whispered.

'Very badly?' in the same tone.

'Yes, very.'

'Will he die?'

'There is no saying! Perhaps.'

With a sudden, rapid movement, she thrust her arms out of bed and clasped them round my neck. My cheek was pressed to hers; I could feel her tremble; I could feel the poor wasted bosom flutter against my heart, and there suddenly flashed across me a vision of the distant nursery: I saw the baby's

glazed and fading eyes, its livid lips; I saw my mother's flowing tears. No pleasure or relief was in that sad embrace. My heart was aching; my soul was desolate and *alone*, leaning thus above the fathomless abyss of this other soul.

CHAPTER L

By the close of that day Raimondo was no more. The tiny corpse exhibited every sign of acute carbonic acid poisoning—the livid leaden hue of the little face, the pinched look about the nose, the dull bluish lips. A narrow line of opaque white was visible under the half-closed lids; on one thigh, near the groin, there was a patch of pale red. Decomposition seemed already to have set in, so unsightly was the tender baby flesh which, but a few hours ago, had been so rosy and firm under my mother's fond caressing hands.

My ears still rang with my mother's screams and sobs and frenzied words, while Federico and the women led her from the room—

'No one is to touch him! No one is to lay a finger on him! I must wash him. I must lay him out. I——'

The sounds died away; doors opened and closed. I was alone. The doctor was still in the room, but I was alone. Something very extraordinary had taken place in me; but what it was, I could not clearly distinguish just yet.

'You had better go,' said the doctor gently, touching me on the shoulder; 'go away from here.'

I obeyed him without a word. As I walked slowly along the passage some one touched my arm.

It was Federico. I shed no tears; I did not even feel much emotion of any kind. What he said to me I do not know; I only caught Giuliana's name.

'Take me to Giuliana,' I said, and slipping my arm into his, I let him lead me like a blind man.

Arrived at her door, 'Now leave me,' I said.

He pressed my arm affectionately and went away. I entered the room alone.

CHAPTER LI

THE silence of the house during the night was sepulchral. A light burned in the passage, and I made my way towards it like a somnambulist. Presently I stopped as if by instinct; a door stood open, a faint light gleamed under the curtain. I pushed it aside and entered the room.

The cradle stood in the middle of the nursery all decked with white between four lighted candles, my brother sitting at one side and Giovanni di Scordio at the other, watching. The presence of the old man caused me no surprise. It seemed quite natural that he should be there; I asked no questions, offered no remark. I fancy I smiled faintly at them in response to their look. I do not know if my lips really smiled, but I had that intention, as if to signify to the watchers, 'Have no thought for me; do not try to console me. See—I am calm; we need not speak.' I advanced a few paces and sat down at the foot of the cradle, between the two candles; to the foot of that cradle I brought my trembling, downcast, feeble spirit that seemed so entirely to have lost its former assurance. My brother and the old man might be in the room; for all that, I was utterly alone.

The dead baby was all in white—in its baptismal robes, I thought—and only its face and its hands were uncovered. The little mouth whose wailings

had so often irritated me was motionless now under the mysterious seal of death. The silence of that little mouth was in me and all around me; I could not take my eyes off it.

It was then, in that deep silence, that a great light broke in upon me and pierced to the very centre of my soul—*I understood.* No words from my brother, no patient smile from the old man, had been able to reveal to me what I learned in a single instant of time from those mute baby lips. *I understood.* And a terrible desire came upon me to confess my guilt, to shout aloud my secret, to declare before these two men, 'He was murdered, and by me.'

I saw that they were regarding me anxiously, wondering at my behaviour, and watching for my alarming immobility to break.

Then I said to them, 'Do you know who killed this innocent babe?'

My voice in that oppressive silence had so strange a sound that I did not recognise it as my own, and sudden terror froze my blood, paralysed my tongue, drew a veil before my eyes. I was seized with violent tremors; I felt my brother put his arm round me and lay his hand upon my head. There was a roaring in my ears that deadened the sound of his words, so that I only caught them indistinctly and with interruptions. I only grasped that he imagined I was overcome by a paroxysm of fever, and that he was trying to get me out of the room. I let him lead me away.

He helped me to my room. The terror was still upon me; and when I caught sight of a candle burning on a table, I started back. I could not remember having lighted it.

'You had better undress and get into bed,' said Federico, drawing me forward with gentle force.

He made me sit down on the bed, and felt my forehead again. 'You see—the fever is rising—undress as quickly as you can.'

With a tender care that reminded me of our mother, he helped me to get my clothes off and covered me up warmly. Then he sat down beside the bed and felt my hand from time to time.

'Are you very cold?' he asked, noticing that I was still trembling all over. 'You are shivering continually. Shall I put some more covering on the bed? Are you thirsty?'

Shivering still, I thought to myself: 'Was it really I who spoke those words? And what if I had gone on? What if Federico, thinking it over presently, should be seized with doubt—should suspect? It is true, I only said, "Do you know who killed this innocent babe?"—But had I not all the aspect of a confessed murderer? When he thinks it over, Federico will be certain to ask himself what I could have meant by such a question—against whom was my strange accusation directed? And my excitement will seem peculiar to him. The doctor! Ah, of course—he must be led to think I alluded to him! —And I must give him further grounds for setting it down to feverish excitement, for making him continue in the belief that I am in a sort of semi-delirious state.' But while I reasoned thus, a thought flashed rapidly through my mind: 'I am actually in a high fever. Supposing I get really delirious, and so betray my secret unconsciously!' I was terrified at the idea, and kept an anxious watch over myself.

'The doctor,' I stammered—'the doctor—he did not know——'

My brother bent over me with an anxious sigh. 'Don't worry yourself so, Tullio. You must keep quiet.' And he took a handkerchief, and dipping it in cold water, laid it on my burning forehead.

Images succeeded one another with dazzling rapidity and clearness in my mind. I saw once more, with terrible intensity of vision, the death agony of the baby. He lay in the cradle in the last throes, his face grey-white, his lower lip so shrunken and depressed as to be scarcely visible. From time to time he would raise his eyelids which were turning violet, but the eyeballs seemed to adhere to them, and only a line of opaque white showed beneath the lid. At intervals the rattling breath ceased altogether. Presently, as a last resource, the doctor ordered the cradle to be carried to the window.

'We must have more air, more light! The child needs air—plenty of air—space——'

Federico and I lifted the cradle—it might have been a bier—and carried it to the window; but in that stronger light the tragedy seemed more awful—in the cold white light diffused by the snow.

'Look, look,' cried my mother, 'he is dying! Feel—there is no pulse.'

'No, no,' answered the doctor, 'he is breathing still, and while there is breath there is hope. Courage!'

He forced a small spoonful of ether between the livid lips, and after a moment the dying child opened its eyes and uttered a faint cry. There was a slight change of colour in its little face, and its nostrils quivered feebly.

'You see that?' said the doctor. 'He stil.

breathes. We must not give up hope till the last moment.'

He set the air in motion about the cradle with a fan, and drawing down the baby's chin, kept its mouth open. The tongue, which adhered to the roof of the mouth, came down with a click; and with a convulsive tremor the tiny, tiny hands which had turned purple in the palms, in the folds of the fingers and under the nails, went up towards the face—those cadaverous little hands that my mother kept wildly pressing. It was heart-rending.

Federico tried to persuade my mother to come away, but she would not leave her post at the cradle, leaning over Raimondo till her face nearly touched his, eagerly watching every sign. One of her tears fell upon her darling's head; as she hastily wiped it away, she noticed that the soft membrane on the top of the baby's head was sunk in a hollow.

'Oh, doctor, look! look!' she cried, distraught.

And my eyes too sought that soft infantile head, which looked as though it were moulded in wax and marked in the middle with a hollow. Every suture of the skull was visible, the temporal vein a dusky blue line.

'Look! Look!'

The feeble flicker of life engendered by the ether had spent itself; the breathing assumed a new tone; the tiny hands fell inert at its sides; the chin drooped lower; the depression in the head grew deeper, and ceased altogether to throb. My mother gave a scream.

'Come—come away—come away with me,' said Federico, trying to draw her away.

'No, no, no!'

The doctor administered another dose of ether, and the heartrending agony was prolonged. Again the little hands quivered towards the face, and the fingers fluttered feebly; between the half-closed lids the eyes appeared and disappeared like little faded flowerets with limp and crumpled petals.

The shades of eve began to fall over the death agony of the Victim. A pale gleam as of the dawn shone upon the windows: the white light cast up by the snow to fight the shadows.

'Is he dead? Is he dead?' screamed my mother, as the rattle in the throat ceased and violet shadows gathered about the nose and mouth.

'No, no—he still breathes.'

One of the women lighted a candle and held it over the cradle, where it shed a flickering yellow light. All at once my mother uncovered the little body and felt it.

'It is cold—quite cold!'

The legs were limp, the feet had turned blue. No words can express the sadness of that poor little scrap of moribund flesh seen by the fitful light of the candle and in face of that window over which the shadows were falling.

One sound yet—indescribable—that was neither a cry nor a rattle, issued from the little blue lips, then a mouthful of milky water. My mother flung herself like a mad woman upon the little corpse.

I saw it all with closed eyes; if I opened them, the scene rose up again before me with incredible intensity.

'That candle—take away that candle!' I cried out to Federico, starting up in bed, terror-stricken at that wavering pale flame.

Federico got up and put the candle behind a screen. Then he returned to my bedside, covered me up again, and renewed the cold bandage on my head.

I could hear his regular breathing through the silence.

CHAPTER LII

ALTHOUGH the next day found me in a state of extreme debility both of mind and body, I insisted on being present during the ceremonies attendant on Raimondo's funeral.

The little body was already enclosed in a white coffin with a glass lid. A wreath of white chrysanthemums was on his head, and a white chrysanthemum lay between the joined hands, but no flower could rival the waxen whiteness of those tiny fingers with their pale violet nails.

Only my brother and Giovanni di Scordio and I, with a few members of the household, were present. The four candles guttered as they burned. Presently the priest entered in his white stole, followed by his assistants, bearing the aspersorium and the cross. Every one knelt.

The priest sprinkled the bier with holy water, pronouncing the words—

'*Sit nomen Domini.*'

He then intoned the psalm—

'*Laudate pueri Dominum.*'

Federico and Giovanni di Scordio then rose from their knees and took up the bier between them. Pietro opened the door, and I followed them. Behind me came the priest, the assistant clergy, and four members of the household with the lighted

candles. And so we passed along the silent corridors towards the chapel while the priest intoned the psalm—

'*Beati immaculati.*'

And when they entered the chapel—

'*Hic accipiet benedictionem a Domino.*'

Federico and Giovanni laid the bier down on the small catafalque in the centre of the chapel, and all knelt while the priest intoned the appointed psalms. He then pronounced the Invocation whereby the soul of the Innocent is called to heaven. Then, after sprinkling the coffin once more with holy water, he left the chapel, followed by the assistant clergy.

We rose from our knees. Nothing now remained but to consign the little coffin to its last resting-place. Giovanni di Scordio lifted the light burden in his arms, his eyes fixed on the glass cover. Federico descended first into the vault, the old man followed with the coffin, I and the household brought up the rear. No one spoke.

The vault was spacious, and all of grey stone, with niches hollowed in the walls, some of which were closed with stone slabs, others yawned deep and shadowy, awaiting the occupant. From the arched roof three lamps fed with olive oil hung motionless, burning steadily in the damp and heavy air with slender, never-dying tongues of flame.

'Here,' murmured my brother, pointing to an open niche under another already furnished with its stone slab, in which the name Costanza was cut in dimly shining letters.

Giovanni now held out the coffin towards us that we might take one last look at the little form within. And as I gazed at the little livid face, the tiny

clasped hands, the white robe, the chrysanthemums, it all seemed so undefinably far away, so intangible, as if, through the transparent cover of the coffin, one had been vouchsafed a brief glimpse of some supernatural mystery—terrible yet sweet.

No one spoke; almost it seemed that we had ceased to breathe.

Giovanni turned to the niche, stooped, and deposited the coffin within, pushing it gently towards the back. He then knelt down and remained there motionless for some minutes.

The coffin gleamed vaguely out of the depths of the niche, and the lamplight cast a soft halo round the venerable white head thus bowed upon the threshold of the Great Shadow.

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